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'Beloved Binsey': studying the visitors' books of St Margaret's Church, Binsey, 2002 - 2012

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Doctorate in Theology and Ministry

RESEARCH BASED THESIS:

'Beloved Binsey': studying the visitors' books of St Margaret's Church, Binsey, 2002 - 2012

SALLY WELCH

ABSTRACT

This study examines the entries covering the period 2002 – 2009 in the visitors' books belonging to St Margaret of Antioch Church, Binsey. The study is placed in the context of pilgrimage and sacred space and explores their theology and spiritual significance. The nature of a visit to Binsey is compared to medieval and contemporary practice of pilgrimage and the similarities and differences of various components explored. The question is asked whether a visit to Binsey can be described as a pilgrimage and how this is justified. The nature of the reactions to the sacred space that is Binsey church as evidenced in the entries in the visitors' books is examined and discussed in relation to comparative studies. The nature of the community that is evident in Binsey is explored and a new term coined 'heterotopian koinonia' to describe it. This term is then used to examine a particular event within the life of the visitors' books, that of the felling of an avenue of chestnut trees on the approach to the church. Suggestions for further research are given and an appreciation of the nature of Binsey's sacred space.

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1 INTRODUCTION

This thesis was born out of ten years of practical and theoretical experience of pilgrimage. Initially, the experience of pilgrimage was intensely practical – in an effort to understand why the enforced quiet and stillness of silent prayer or meditation was not suitable to everyone, different methods of prayer were explored. Pilgrimages were undertaken both in this country and further afield, in Italy, Spain, France and Norway, and the effects on the participants noted. The concept of a spiritual journey to a sacred place satisfied the desire to find time to explore a relationship with God and with creation without the challenging restrictions of silence and stillness – while the body was engaged in movement and walking, the mind was freed to reflect, meditate and pray.

From an exploration of physical pilgrimage, the research was deepened and broadened to include other types of journeying – the impact of labyrinth on personal spirituality was investigated, and walking the labyrinth used to encourage pilgrimage spirituality while remaining in the same place. This was found to be very useful for sharing the concept of pilgrimage without the physical challenges that were often involved.

The use of prayer stations within rural churches was also explored as a way of encouraging prayer amongst small, rural populations. Also seen as an offspring of a fully-fledged pilgrimage, prayer stations were investigated as a way of enabling congregations to engage with the sacred space within their churches. Congregations were encouraged to look at their churches from different points of view, both physically and mentally. Groups of people were gathered to pray for significant periods of time in ways that were different and often challenging, and a feeling of community was formed by the action of these groups. A short, M-level study was undertaken on the impact of prayer stations on the perceptions of rural congregations of their church and their community. However, the setting up and maintenance of prayer stations was discovered to be a major burden for small churches and their leaders – these installations could be used for special events but not as an everyday way of helping visitors engage with sacred space.

In 2009 the Bishop of Oxford launched the Diocesan Living Faith initiative, designed to revitalise the Diocese of Oxford in five crucial areas of faith and life. The first target was that of ‘sustaining the sacred centre’, and different methods of prayer and worship were

encouraged. The initiative was focussed on one primary method of prayer, which would be continued throughout the five-year programme. It was decided this method was to be pilgrimage. The author of this study was designated the Diocesan Advisor for Labyrinth and Pilgrimage and ways on introducing church congregations and the wider community to pilgrimage spirituality were studied. Leaflets were published, books were written, and a Diocesan Pilgrimage Map was produced, which featured twelve of the most significant pilgrim places within the diocese. The church of St Margaret of Antioch, Binsey was one of those chosen, partly for its connection with the literary history of Oxford, but partly also for its proximity to the Thames Path, a national trail which runs from west to east across the Diocese. A Diocesan book was written to accompany the official Thames Path Guide, which furnished the path with a layer of spirituality – reflections, prayers and activities which could be undertaken while walking the path.

It was while researching these initiatives that the author of this study began to visit Binsey church. The church itself, lying close to the city centre of Oxford, was set in beautiful countryside, although it was in itself unremarkable architecturally. The author was asked to look at ways in which the welcome of the church to its visitors could be enhanced and improved, and it was while this was being investigated that the rich data contained within the visitors' book was noted. Archived copies of previous visitors' books were obtained, and a deeper study began, the results of which are to be found below, together with suggestions for further research and action.

Chapter two comprises a brief history of Christian pilgrimage, from its roots in the Bible to contemporary journeys. Chapter three places this in-depth study within a wider investigation of the theology of pilgrimage and place. The place of pilgrimage in the Old Testament, New Testament and the Early Church is looked at briefly, as well as the arguments for and against its validity as a spiritual discipline. The role of place within pilgrimage, and the nature of sacred space are then examined. The elements which help to define a sacred place are explored, and the role of sacred place within society discussed.

Chapter four sets the church of St Margaret of Antioch, Binsey in historical and geographical context. A brief history of the village of Binsey and its church are given, and some of the historical and literary associations, as well as its founding legend, are explored.

Chapter five outlines the methods used when undertaking this study, and details some of the statistical results from an in-depth examination of the contents of the visitors' books. These results are compared with the results from parallel surveys undertaken on similar churches and shrines, and the similarities and differences analysed.

In Chapter six, the comments made in the visitors' books are analysed in more depth. The structure of this chapter takes the form of a medieval pilgrimage map, where the geographical and historical features are distinguished only in so far as they are useful to the traveller. The shape of the chapter is that of a traditional pilgrimage journey – each aspect of the journey, such as rituals of departure, travelling companions etc., is discussed from the viewpoint of both the medieval and the contemporary pilgrim. The Binsey experience as reflected in the entries in the visitors' books, is then compared to these two viewpoints and similarities and differences noted and discussed.

Chapter seven summarises the results of these discussions and establishes whether in the light of the examination in chapter five, the 'visitor event' that occurs at Binsey can be described as pilgrimage at all, and if so, in what ways this can be said to occur. This chapter concludes that although the events that occur at Binsey do not fit exactly into the commonly understood definition of pilgrimage, nonetheless all the elements of pilgrimage are evident, just not in a usually expected form. It asserts that since pilgrimage is in any case itself a metaphor for the larger Christian journey of life, the differences in the Binsey experience do not preclude it from being defined as a pilgrimage.

Chapter eight compares what happens at Binsey to a more general understanding of what constitutes a holy place, referring to research on similar small churches and shrines undertaken by others. Several of the elements that constitute a holy place are seen to be present at Binsey; with the significant difference that evidence of a worshipping community is substituted in Binsey by the community that exists within the visitors' book. Chapter nine continues this theme with an investigation into what type of community this is, and examines Binsey both as liminoid *communitas* and as heterotopia. It concludes by introducing a new concept of community, that of heterotopian *koinonia*, a community that allows for honesty and reflection while still giving the freedom of multilayers of interpretations. One event that is discussed in the visitors' book with much emotion and conversation - that of the felling of the avenue of chestnut trees leading to the church - is

examined in the light of the validity of heterotopian koinonia as a definition of what occurs. Chapter ten concludes the research by offering some suggestions for further research.

2 A BRIEF HISTORY OF PILGRIMAGE

The history of pilgrimage within England and Europe, the areas with which this study is most concerned, dates back almost as far as records begin. With its roots in the Old and New Testament, the concept of travelling to a site made significant either by an event that occurred there, a person who lived there or the remains of a holy man or woman has been part of the religious psyche of Christians since that faith began. Although several strong theological arguments have been made against it (see Chapter Three), the practice of ‘a journey to a special or holy place as a way of making an impact on one’s life with the revelation of God associated with that place,’¹ has never entirely disappeared from European Christianity. Recent years have seen a dramatic revival in an appreciation of its benefits, some of which find their roots in an awareness of the long history of similar walkers, a feeling of walking in the path of those who have gone before over the years, both well known and ordinary members of the ‘community of saints.’

The reasons behind Jewish and Christian pilgrimage lie in the Bible. A theme that runs throughout the Old Testament in particular is that of a wandering nation, accompanied by God, and indeed often ‘closer to him when they are wandering through the wilderness than when they are settled and secure and begin to forget him’² Abraham was the founding father of Islam, Judaism and Christianity, and it is to him that the first imperative to go is given ‘Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you, and make your name great so that you will be a blessing’ (Genesis 12:2) Abraham lived as a ‘nomad with his flocks and herds and building a temporary altar to God wherever he set up camp’³, and this tradition was continued by Moses who led his people through the wilderness for forty years after their escape from slavery in Egypt. God himself preferred not to have a settled base, as his words to David when he proposed building a temple in Jerusalem revealed (2Samuel 7:5-6) Later however, a temple was built by Solomon, which stood from around 1000BC until about 587 when it was destroyed and the Jews eventually banished from the city. A second temple built in around 538BC lasted until its destruction by the Romans in 63BC and it is this second temple that saw the flourishing of pilgrimage to Jerusalem as the two feasts of Passover and Sukkot reminded all Jewish people of their wandering history.

¹ Bartholomew and Llewelyn 2004, xii

² Bradley 2009, 24

³ Bradley 2009, 24

Although there is less overt mention of pilgrimage in the New Testament, nevertheless there is evidence that Jesus obeyed the call to Jerusalem at festival times. The records of his life in the Gospels depict him as frequently on the move 'foxes have their lairs and birds their nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Luke 9:58). After the resurrection the disciples continue to travel, journeying throughout the known world as they spread the story of Christ.

With these imperatives in mind, and with a natural curiosity and desire to see the sites where the key episodes of Christ's life took place, it would not be surprising to discover that Christian pilgrimage began almost as soon as the empty tomb was discovered. However there is little evidence that this occurred, since 'for the first three centuries after Christ's death it was in fact difficult to undertake pilgrimage to any site associated with the formation of Christianity at list in an overt manner as the religion remained suppressed and its adherents were persecuted.'⁴ It has also been argued that the desire to distance Christianity from Judaism 'delayed the moment at which Jerusalem, which had become the Holy City of the Jews and central to the practice of the Jewish religion, could be appropriated as the Holy City of the Christians.'⁵ This changed dramatically with the triumph of Constantine as ruler of the Roman Empire – he declared Christianity to be the imperial religion and in order encourage unity 'in a church riddled with doctrinal disputes'⁶, summoned the Council of Nicaea in 325AD.

Although pilgrimage remained an area of dispute for centuries, the desire to explore the Holy Land predominated and was supported by the Emperor's mother herself. Helena journeyed to Jerusalem and other sites in 326AD and is reported to have found the remains of the True Cross as well as nails from the crucifixion. Imperial funds were used to build basilicas at the sites of the Holy Sepulchre and the Nativity. With this powerful endorsement, the way was made clear for other Christians to visit the sites mentioned in the Old and New Testaments, and the beginning of a body of pilgrimage literature can be found from as early as 325 when the nun Egeria wrote about her experiences of travelling through the Holy Land in 'Itinerarium Egeriae.'⁷ These works enabled those who were not able to visit Jerusalem, to picture them in their imagination, although an actual visit was

⁴ Barnes 2006, 29

⁵⁵ Webb 2002, 2

⁶ Barnes 2006, 29

⁷ Wilkinson 1981 151-163

still preferable: Jerome's 'Liber Locorum' published in 390AD recorded Jerome's delight at seeing the places he had only read about.

Constantine also developed other Christian sites such as the Lateran Church in Rome to house the tomb of St Peter.⁸ 'By the end of the fourth century pilgrimage to both the Holy Land and Rome had become a significant expression of Christian devotion and was being actively encouraged by the Church'.⁹ However, 'for every pilgrim who made the arduous journey to the Holy Land in these early centuries there must have been many more who frequented shrines closer at hand'.¹⁰ Bede describes the tomb of St Alban and mentions a visit made to it by Germanus of Auxerre¹¹ and also writes of the journeys of men and women to Ireland 'a costly form of witness involving perpetual exile from the comforts and distractions of home'.¹² In time the sites associated with the Celtic saints of the 7th and 8th centuries, Iona, Crouagh Patrick, Lindisfarne, became places of pilgrimage themselves as men and women sought contact with the great names of Celtic Christianity. These sites and others around England became more popular as travelling to the Holy Land became more problematic. The final fall of Jerusalem in 1453 meant that European sites such as Rome and Santiago de Compostella in Spain became the main goal of those wishing to make a lengthy pilgrimage. This latter housed the remains of St James, reportedly discovered in 835. Pilgrims began visiting this shrine from the 10th century, the first recorded English pilgrims arrived in the late 11th century and 'by the early 12th century the pilgrimage had become a highly organised affair'.¹³ Routes from all over Europe converged on a single route through Spain, supported by an infrastructure of hostels, guest houses and large churches for devotions along the route, often themselves housing shrines and relics. 'The pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela became an international road, and many of the places along the way became destinations in their own right, albeit of lesser significance'.¹⁴

Within England itself, shrines were also founded around the country's major saints. Walsingham, the site where in 1061 the noblewoman Richildis received a vision telling her to build a replica of the house of the Nativity rapidly became popular, aided by the

⁸⁸ Bradley 2009, 34

⁹ Bradley 2009, 36

¹⁰ Webb 2002, 3

¹¹ Webb 2000, 2

¹² Bradley 2009, 37

¹³ Barnes 2006, 35

¹⁴ Barnes 2006, 35

establishment of an Augustinian priory there in 1153 and several visits from the monarchy. The shrine of Thomas a Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, murdered by Henry II in 1170 rapidly became a site of pilgrimage, with even Henry II himself bowing to the inevitable and making a penitential journey there himself. These shrines, along with lesser home-grown saints such as Swithun at Winchester and Oswald at Worcester, became very popular and as pilgrimage became part of English religious practice, the country was crossed and recrossed with pilgrimage routes, encouraging trade and a growing range of businesses dedicated to the needs of pilgrims. During the 'golden years' of pilgrimage – from the early eleventh to the early sixteenth century – it has been estimated that up to one fifth of the population of Europe 'was either on pilgrimage or engaged in servicing the booming pilgrim trade.'¹⁵ Elaborate tables of penance were drawn up during the fourteenth century to illustrate which sites gained most time off from purgatory for each particular offence committed. The *Liber Sancti Jacobi*, a twelfth century manual for pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, gave both route directions, liturgies, and a reminder that a pilgrimage was not simply an excursion but a serious penitential undertaking – clearly even by then there were concerns that such a journey was not always undertaken in the correct spirit.

These seeds of decline were fertilised by the growing danger of travel through not only the Middle East but Europe itself, stricken with conflicts both national and internal, and came to fruition with the Reformation of the sixteenth century, when 'pilgrimage was largely suppressed by both the civil and ecclesiastical authorities.'¹⁶ In 1536, the Bishop of St David's ordered pilgrimage to that shrine to cease and relics to be removed, and Becket's shrine in Canterbury Cathedral was also destroyed. Gradually most of the shrines throughout Protestant Britain and Europe were destroyed during the sixteenth century, with a corresponding growth of emphasis on the internal or spiritual pilgrimage, the inner journey of faith. John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* summed up this metaphor of life itself as a journey through to the eternal city of Jerusalem, and this sentiment was echoed by churchmen and officials.

'The rational and sceptical atmosphere of Enlightenment Europe in the eighteenth century was not conducive to pilgrimage,'¹⁷ with the Parisian church of St James, starting point of a route to Santiago de Compostella, being completely destroyed by the French Revolution.

¹⁵ Bradley 2009, 44

¹⁶ Bradley 2009 60

¹⁷ Bradley 2009, 63

However, 'Catholics continued to visit shrines in Italy, France, Germany and Spain,'¹⁸ and the rise of the Romantic and NeoGothic movements brought pilgrimage once again into the realms of acceptable practice. The nineteenth century saw a resurgence of interest in the Holy Land and Rome, encouraged by companies such as Cook's Tours, who provided tours to both places. The appearance of the Virgin Mary to a 14 year old girl at Lourdes in 1858 gave rise to a new site, dedicated to healing, with other sites including Fatima, Iona, Taize and Medugorje gaining credence in the twentieth century.

Today, places within the UK such as Iona and Lindisfarne receive over 150,000 visitors a year, while Santiago de Compostela numbers its pilgrims in the millions.

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¹⁸ Barnes 2006, 40

3 AN INVESTIGATION INTO A THEOLOGY OF PILGRIMAGE AND PLACE

A theology of place cannot be explored without examining also a theology of pilgrimage – the two are symbiotic, dependent each upon the other. Pilgrimage is commonly defined as a spiritual journey to a sacred place – without a destination, there would be no end to the journey and it would become a mere wandering. Place too cannot exist without being differentiated from other places, and physical place can only be differentiated by the journey to and from this place. This journeying, seeking, is a universal experience : ‘we may long for the still centre, we may agree with St Augustine that our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee, but while we are on this earth our human nature is to move, through time and across distance; we age, change and develop. The physical movement of pilgrimage symbolises purposefulness, intention,’¹⁹ writes the psychologist du Boulay, but the urge behind pilgrimage is deeper than a mere restlessness – it is an outward expression of an inner searching. McConville describes pilgrimage as a ‘possible avenue for self-understanding and spirituality’²⁰, Walker goes no further than stating that ‘at its best pilgrimage is a seeking after roots that refresh’²¹, but the experiences of those who undertake a lengthy and challenging journey to a holy place demand that a greater significance than that of a ‘spiritual discipline which is not compulsory but on hand if we need it’²² should be given to the discipline of pilgrimage. Pilgrimage is a physical response to an often unspoken need to journey towards a sacred centre, to explore a closer relationship with the creator and the created, finding within the exploration a place for the self: ‘pilgrimage is a dynamic model which links people, place and God in a manner which is consonant with the biblical paradigm’²³ Du Boulay describes this as an ‘instinctive response to a deep human need’, as an ‘incarnation of an inner journey.’²⁴

The reasons behind Christian pilgrimage, both in its heyday in medieval Europe and today as it enjoys a revival in popularity as a spiritual discipline, will be explored later in this research, but there can be no denying its attraction, its compulsion, even, for some of those who seek to draw closer to God: ‘I sometimes wonder whether we are drawn to holy places because we need to externalise the sacred centre within us all. The thought that

¹⁹ Du Boulay 1998, 17

²⁰ McConville 2004, 18

²¹ Walker 2004, 88

²² Scott 2004, 206

²³ Inge 2003, x

²⁴ Du Boulay 1996, 10

God is within us it too frightening; we need to locate him somewhere else. Perhaps too we may need to find God in a particular place before we can realise that he is everywhere'²⁵

These sorts of questions demonstrate the dangers of pilgrimage, most particularly the danger of idolatry. Questions need constantly to be asked as to the nature of pilgrimage, whether the perceived necessity for literal travelling to physical places in order to understand the Gospel message better does not in fact devalue the universality of that message. 'What would Jesus have made of this focus on the places where his feet had stood?'²⁶ asks Walker dramatically. Perhaps also the occasional excursion into what could be a profoundly difficult and challenging mode of living was too often made the excuse for a less rigorous spirituality when the pilgrimage was over: 'there was a real sense in which the popularity of place oriented pilgrimage and devotion to the saints threatened to diminish the true scale of the Christian life'²⁷. Dyas discusses the dangers of 'spiritual reductionism' as 'the demands of a direct relationship with God and the requirement to make the whole of life a pilgrimage were gradually scaled down to something a little more manageable'.²⁸

Dyas argues that our understanding of pilgrimage has changed over the years. Today, perhaps, it is too often viewed as an end in itself – the journeying to a sacred place is enough in itself. The journey, encounters along the road and the arrival become the significant events, the channel through which deeper spiritual understanding can be arrived at. However, the concept that was inherited by the medieval church was that of physical pilgrimage as a metaphor for the place of human beings on earth: 'the primary understanding of pilgrimage inherited by the medieval Church was not that of journeying to holy places but the Biblical concept of Christians as pilgrims and strangers who travel through the exile of this world towards the heavenly Jerusalem'²⁹. It should have no status in itself, as in the literal sense the events of the New Testament have removed the need for pilgrimage to a sacred place. It is no longer necessary to find God in a particular place – thanks to the life, death and resurrection of Christ; God is now incarnate and can be found everywhere. Pilgrimage for Christians has become a metaphor for 'the journey of Christian living that has as its already anticipated goal the heavenly Jerusalem that stands for the life

²⁵ Du Boulay 1996, 5

²⁶ Walker 2004, 88

²⁷ Dyas 2004, 101

²⁸ Dyas 2004, 101

²⁹ Dyas 2004, 94

of the age to come'³⁰. This concept both relegates and elevates the role of pilgrimage within Christian spiritual practise. Pilgrimage itself has no intrinsic value – God cannot be found on a journey any more easily than he can be found in stillness. There is greater value in a life lived without seeking to escape responsibilities, without resisting the stability of community, a life 'lived in daily obedience to God in the place of one's calling, resisting sin and serving others'³¹. However, it can act as a metaphor for 'the pilgrimage that is Christian existence'³². The physical act of pilgrimage 'enables an imaginative travelling, which event can in turn be used by the God known there in the past to be known afresh in the present.'³³ It can be used to understand more clearly our own situations and to re-inhabit them more deeply: 'pilgrimage as a metaphor for Christian existence does not mean the abandonment of our particular place or cultural space but provides the resources for reorientation within the places and spaces we inhabit'.³⁴ Physical pilgrimage 'expresses the souls longing to find its true destination'³⁵. It can be used as a metaphor for the journey of life which takes place through territory which is inhabited but not owned by human beings, and can be further employed to rededicate all places to their original purpose of glorifying their creator: 'the spatial story is an act of resistance to the dominant over coding of the map. And yet it does not depend on establishing its own place, its own territory to defend. Instead it moves on pilgrimage through the places defined by the map and transforms them into alternative spaces through its practices. The City of God makes use of this world as it moves through it on pilgrimage to its heavenly home.'³⁶

For many contemporary pilgrims, it is 'all about the journey'. It is while physically travelling that moments of spiritual insight occur, times of enlightenment and close encounter with God. It is in enduring physically challenging conditions that pilgrims develop mental and psychological resistance to the fleeting difficulties of a transitory world. Journey companions share life stories in ways which are both moving and uplifting, bringing a glimpse of the nature of true Christian fellowship. All too often, the first view of the pilgrimage destination is met with disappointment and sadness; it is a sign that the journey is over, the time of separation from the everyday world is drawing to a close and all too soon normal life must be resumed. However this view, commonly held though it is,

³⁰ McConville 2004, 54

³¹ Dyas 2004, 98

³² McConville 2004, 45

³³ Walker 2004, 88

³⁴ McConville 2004, 48

³⁵ Du Boulay 1996, 17

³⁶ Cavanagh 1999, 191

devalues greatly the significance and importance of place both within everyday life and as the destination of pilgrimage: 'the whole idea of a place of pilgrimage depends on the acknowledgement of the importance of place and on a realisation of the rightness of a sense of locality'.³⁷

An exploration of place is particularly important for this study as the journey is demonstrated to be of comparatively little significance compared to the experiences at the site itself. To investigate place is to investigate a fundamental element of human existence, both physical: 'place is a central element in human life and identity'³⁸ and spiritual: 'the human sense of space is a critical theological and spiritual issue'.³⁹ Place is more than inhabited space, it is a 'historical and storied concept'⁴⁰ and fundamental to a sense of personal and community identity. However, to arrive at a place, there must first be a journey, and the story of the people of God is one of both place and journey.

Journey is integral to the Old Testament: 'the word 'GO' is seared into the very flesh of Israel, a driving force in its religious consciousness to this very day. They are a people who have had to learn how to remain in the presence and under the blessing of God whilst being always on the move'.⁴¹ From the very beginning, with the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, human beings have been forced to wander the world, in a state of separation from God and absent from their original home. This state of wandering, however, was brought to an end with the gift of land to the people of God: 'Yahweh bestowed the land on the people, that in the land they might glorify the Lord'.⁴² God delivered the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. During a period of journeying, of wandering in the desert, they were formed into a covenant people at Mount Sinai and given the promise of a land of their own, where he would dwell with them and be their God. The people of God became the people of the promise, the people of a land set aside especially for them. God's involvement with the nation of Israel was through his involvement with them in their land. Place became the heart of revelation from God, and journeying to this place became the way of establishing the identity of the children of God: 'Mount Zion in Jerusalem was where God lived among the Israelites, his address; as it were,

³⁷ Sheehy 2007, 18

³⁸ Scott 2004, 208

³⁹ Sheldrake 2001, 1

⁴⁰ Scott 2004, 208

⁴¹ Giles 1996, 18

⁴² Cragg, 2004, 3

and regular pilgrimage to Jerusalem was a vital way of embedding within Israelite consciousness their identity as the people of Yahweh. Psalm 84:5 'Blessed are those whose strength is in you, in whose heart are the highways to Zion.'⁴³ Nor was it just at Jerusalem that revelation from God could occur – the land of the Old Testament is scattered with small altars and cairns commemorating the actions of God; Jacob and his dream, and the subsequent stone that he laid on the site being but one example: 'the place is consecrated for future generations because of the revelation that has happened there, and it becomes a sign to others of the reality of the God who reveals himself'.⁴⁴ 'The idea of pilgrimage is rooted in the Old Testament, and Old Testament pilgrimage is rooted in the land of Israel'⁴⁵ states McConville and the thread of journey, of the need constantly to ritualise values and narratives in the pilgrimage that reminds the people of the Old Testament of their identity in God, runs bright through the stories of the book. However, for Christians, this identity of Yahweh with the land of Israel is swept aside by the life, death and resurrection of Christ.

'The most celebrated tomb visited by pilgrims in the Middle Ages was empty',⁴⁶ writes the historian Sumption, and much of the debate over the theology of place has originated from the question of whether there can be any theological justification in journeying on pilgrimage to certain locations because of their sacredness. Holm argues that although Christianity did inherit from the Jews the concept of the divine covenant and the promise of God, this concept became more elaborate and developed into the abstract rather than the concrete. Thus the promised land of the Jewish people becomes not a physical place that can be reached on earth, but 'an image of heaven.'⁴⁷ The whole of human life on earth is the pilgrimage through the wilderness; the Promised Land will not be reached until after death. This is because the promise of God was delivered through the actions of Christ – from being a place, the promise became a person. Yahweh no longer dwelt in Jerusalem but in Jesus. The spoken covenant was redeemed in the Logos, the Word. Place was no longer necessary, as a person had fulfilled all the promises of place: 'the patriarchal hopes for an inheritance are transcended by their eschatological fulfilment.'⁴⁸ Because of the

⁴³ Bartholomew and Hughes 2004, xii

⁴⁴ Inge 2003, 67

⁴⁵ McConville 2004, 17

⁴⁶ Sumption 1975, 89

⁴⁷ Holm and Bowker 1994, 40

⁴⁸ Scott 2004, 203

Gospel, place could no longer be special, no longer be sacred: 'the revelation in Christ broke down the elective particularity not only of race but of place.'⁴⁹

Now, with a home in Christ, the whole of the earth became desacralized – there was no place more or less special as Christ could be found everywhere: 'in the Bible as a whole Christians can no longer regard Jerusalem as God's address now that Christ is risen from the dead.'⁵⁰ There was no place more or less special as Christ could be found nowhere – the true home for the wandering children of God was no longer the promised land of Jerusalem, but the promised land of heaven in Christ. Christians were to live as strangers in the world, with nowhere to lay their heads.

However, despite the sophistication of this argument, it cannot be denied that the New Testament is every bit as place bound as the Old. Stories that relate to the lives of human beings must happen somewhere – for every story that is told within the overarching placeless Logos, there is an earthbound place. The actions of the Gospels themselves are structured around the pilgrim festivals – Jesus and the disciples must travel to Jerusalem for the Passover. Jesus himself journeys out into the wilderness to pray, and there is constant movement between the small places of Galilee and Nazareth and the home of Israel, Jerusalem. The book of Acts becomes even more place specific – St Paul travels to Jerusalem for Pentecost, the Apostles travel to establish local places for fellowship and worship. The particularity of Jerusalem is indeed changed forever by its fulfilment in Christ, but the particularity of revelation is still embedded in place – Paul is struck down on the road to Damascus, the disciples meet Jesus on the road to Emmaus. Journey and place are intrinsic to the development and spread of Christianity –how could it be otherwise, when 'places are the seat of relations and of meeting and activity between God and the world'.⁵¹

Added to this was the universal nature of the concept of sacred space, a concept which goes far back into history, even prehistory: 'the idea of the sacred place, the temenos, is an archetypal theme that has run through history since early man was first inspired to worship at natural sites such as a spring a stone a great height or a tree'.⁵² True, the New

⁴⁹ Bartholomew and Hughes 2004, 203

⁵⁰ Bartholomew and Hughes 2004, 203

⁵¹ Inge 2003, 68

⁵² Du Boulay 1996, 1

Testament brought the idea that 'Jesus, not Jerusalem was the centre of God's purpose',⁵³ and even St Paul spoke of 'the Jerusalem above' (Gal. 4:26), but there was still the desire to see where these world changing events had happened – as early as 290 AD Eusebius lists most of the Biblical sites in his Onomastikon.

With the conversion of Constantine in the 4th century, the gathering places of Christians could become only more public, since the threat of persecution, so long a determinant of secrecy and privacy, had disappeared. They could become larger too, and began to be indicators of power and prestige, wealth and influence. The Holy Land was transformed as people sought to fulfil their desire to 'see and touch the places where Christ was physically present.'⁵⁴ The churches and other buildings that sprang up here provoked the questions of 'how the churches view of the sacred should affect the understanding of its church buildings set apart for the worship of the Christian God.'⁵⁵ This was partly solved at least, by Bishop Cyril of Alexandria (376-444), whose theology of place held that holy places were able in themselves to convince people of the message of Christ. Their construction and design could help believers in their understanding of the Gospel. As such the buildings themselves became witness to the Gospel of Christ and therefore had an intrinsic power and sacredness: 'holy tourism replaced by pilgrimage – the church now had sanctioned or should we say sanctified its own distinctive holy places'.⁵⁶

As Christianity spread, there developed a parallel concept of the sacred nature of places developing from their association with holy people. The power of the sacred 'increasingly focussed on holy men and women who were tangible links between heaven and earth.'⁵⁷ People such as apostles, martyrs, hermits and monks, could, by their actions or inhabitation of certain places, imbue them with their own holiness, so that the place itself became holy. Gradually, the concept developed of the spiritual gains of travelling not just to those places where Jesus had performed his redemptive actions, nor even the places inhabited by the apostles, but to the homes of holy people, significant Christians. These saints, by nature of their outstanding virtue on earth, could deliver to those who petitioned them, something of their own holiness from their elevated position in heaven. They could, in the hierarchy of heaven, influence matters to the good of those who appealed to them from earth.

⁵³ Inge 2003, 75

⁵⁴ Sumption 1975, 89 ref Paulinus of Nola EP XLIV 14 pp402-403

⁵⁵ Walker 2004, 83

⁵⁶ Walker 2004, 83

⁵⁷ Sheldrake 2005, 38

Journeys made to pray at shrines for forgiveness of sins, for healing, for help with domestic and health matters, became first popular, then systemised, then institutionalised into the operation of the church.

Parallel to this, but without essentially disturbing either concept, was the notion of the interior pilgrimage, the benefits of the contemplative life, and the meditations on scripture that brought one closer in touch with the Logos itself: 'the Celtic Church, to which Melangell belonged, saw no clash of theology between the fully developed Christian idea of the immanent God who can turn every place into hallowed ground, and the holy site, linked specifically to the last resting place of some outstanding Christian believer.'⁵⁸

However, this ability to hold two beliefs in parallel was not always deemed appropriate, and even today there are those who argue that the event of the incarnation means that place should no longer be significant to Christians. The doctrine of the incarnation, that 'Jesus of Nazareth is the expression in the visible material human terms of the character of God'⁵⁹ changed the character of human relationships with Christ. The people of the Old Testament had been people of a 'situated revelation, in a land which Yahweh had hallowed, and in a city where he had chosen to dwell.'⁶⁰ However, as mentioned above, the incarnation meant that the holy place was no longer a place but a person, a Word. This meant that all nations and all places were equal under the realm of God: 'the revelation in Christ broke down the elective particularity, not only of race but also of place.'⁶¹

'The importance of particular geographical location as it is understood in the Old Testament has been superseded by the person of Jesus Christ – space has been Christified by the incarnation'.⁶² In the light of this belief, there is no one place where God is any more present or powerful than anywhere else. The universal nature of the God's command to turn from sin and believe implies that everywhere is as holy, as appropriate for worship, as anywhere else. It is only from this standpoint that the imperative to travel to all corners of the world and share the gospel with all peoples becomes theologically possible: 'and in this conception we find the motivating conviction behind the early

⁵⁸ Keulemans and Burton 2012, 195

⁵⁹ Sheehy 2007, 16

⁶⁰ O'Donovan 1999, 44

⁶¹ O'Donovan 1999, 44

⁶² Inge 2003, 57

church's mission to the gentile world.⁶³ The importance of Jerusalem as God's 'home address' became radically reduced: 'Christianity was launched without concept of holy city.'⁶⁴ Those who believed in Christ dwelt in Christ and he in them – it no longer mattered whether physically they were in Jerusalem, Corinth, Philippi or any one of the hundreds of places where Christ was worshipped. Admittedly an event of significance could, and did happen in many different places, but these places did not in themselves become significant – they were merely containers for the event rather than part of the event itself, argues Susan White 'whether a place can be deemed sacred is entirely a function of the virtues of the particular people associated with it at any particular time. A church is thus a space and not a place; it is a receptacle it is a commodity to be used'.⁶⁵

Having swept away the idea of sacred place, travel to such places at once becomes unimportant: 'a robust doctrine of incarnation certainly entails that there were actual and particular settings for Jesus mission and passion, but the significance of the incarnation and of what happened in those settings is not altered one iota by attempting to locate, reconstruct or visit such sites.'⁶⁶ More than that, it becomes theologically incorrect: 'by the ever present Holy Spirit, through the new peoplehood, and via the now given Scriptures and the perpetual sacrament, the unforgettable Lord was present to his Church in terms which required no travel.'⁶⁷ The majority view is that only people can be holy, not places, argues Inge, and this is certainly an argument that is as relevant today as it was when it was first put forward as a counter to the great tide of pilgrimage journeys in the middle ages: 'the goal of pilgrimage, temple worship, has been transformed Christologically. Jesus is the true place of worship and so to go on pilgrimage is to come home to Jesus'.⁶⁸

Some would go further than that, in declaring that holiness cannot even be found in people, let alone places. Holiness is a lifestyle, a way of thinking, speaking and acting that brings the practitioner closer to God in personal relationship with the creator, a relationship so intimate that time and place are irrelevant, needing 'neither a sacred place, nor a sacred ethnos, nor a sacred tongue'.⁶⁹

⁶³ O'Donovan 1999, 44

⁶⁴ Walker 2004, 74

⁶⁵ Inge 2003, 30

⁶⁶ McConville 2004, 45

⁶⁷ Cragg 2004, 8

⁶⁸ McConville 2004, 39

⁶⁹ Cragg 2004, 5

Old Testament beliefs centred round the place of God's promise, the Holy City, Jerusalem. The New Testament saw this Holy City transformed into a Holy Word, incarnate in Christ. Because of this, the need to travel to the Holy City was dispensed with once and for all – Christ could be found everywhere. Places where events of significance occurred did exist, but these were merely containers for the events. Similarly, those places inhabited by holy people had no validity other than as shelter providers for the holy ones. By these arguments, Christian pilgrimages should preferably not occur at all. If they do, they should be undertaken very consciously as metaphors for the greater Christian journey through the wilderness of the earth to the true home of the soul.

This argument has gathered strength with the growing globalisation of today's world, which has seen the 'annihilation of space through time'⁷⁰. With the development of the global village, the telescoping of time and space through improved transport and communications networks, the place at which one finds oneself physically has become less and less important: 'moving dividing lines of private and public, weakening the relationship between social situations and physical places.'⁷¹

This 'devaluation of place' has occurred through the rapid development of international ideas, spurred on by world wars, mass economic and conflict-driven migration and the postmodern detachment from place that is symptomatic of instant communication and rapid travel. Individual places throughout the world are experiencing a weakening of identity 'to the point where they not only look alike, but offer the same experience – e.g. MacDonald's.'⁷² What instincts towards the local that still exist are voiceless: 'our intellectual traditions have not enabled us either to articulate them or to understand them.'⁷³ Forecasters predict the time when all places look the same and have the same value, existing as commodities for the place-free existence of cyber space.

This doom-laden view sits curiously but not incompatibly with a theology of Christological placelessness, and could indeed be the prevailing theology for our time, but for the constant resistance that is encountered in relation to our own existence as physical,

⁷⁰ Inge 2003, 11

⁷¹ Inge 2003, 12

⁷² Inge 2003, 12

⁷³ O'Donovan 1999, 45

embodied human beings: 'place is as necessary to us as the air we breathe.'⁷⁴ It is inappropriate and misguided to ignore the influence that the physical situations in which we find ourselves have upon our mind and spirit – one only has to consider the extremes of misery encountered in refugee camps or prisons to admit that the relationship between the physical space we inhabit and our well-being are intrinsically linked: 'place has a determining influence on the way people behave, the way they think, the rhythm of their lives and their relationships'⁷⁵. 'The physical landscape is a partner and an active rather than purely passive partner in the conversations that create the nature of a place'⁷⁶ argues Sheldrake, and this argument could be taken further. If we ignore the significance of place, we ignore a major part of the creation of God, for his encounters with his people have always been within place: 'we are creatures of time and space, empowered by memory and living in a God visited world.'⁷⁷ The Christ event transformed place, it did not destroy it, and the fact of the incarnation merely accentuates the significance of place with the history of salvation.

O'Donovan sums up the arguments that are given against the concept of sacred space: 'on the one hand we have a philosophical abstraction from the dimensions of space in order to capture the immaterial quality of thought; on the other we have a theological desacralisation of special places, which, by universalising the place of encounter with the divine, renders all places equally special.'⁷⁸ However, it can equally be argued that the incarnation makes place even more significant, not only in general terms, but in sanctifying specific places for the events that happened within them. Undoubtedly, even though the concerns of the early church was to move from the small and local to the entire inhabited world, the letters of Paul, spelling out the missionary imperative for all Christians, were targeted at communities named after the places they lived in – the tie between local and global was made early and positively. The role of place within encounters between God and his people cannot be discounted. We are place-limited and time-bound – in order for God to reveal himself to his people, these revelations must be within times and places chosen by God, specific to the encounter. 'It cannot be otherwise, since, as we have seen, places are the seat of meeting and interaction between God and the world.'⁷⁹ The event of

⁷⁴ Inge 2003, ix

⁷⁵ Sheldrake 2001, 4

⁷⁶ Sheldrake 2001, 15

⁷⁷ Walker 2004, 88

⁷⁸ O'Donovan 1999, 45

⁷⁹ Inge 2003, 100

the incarnation is even more significant in developing the importance of place within a relationship with God: 'the incarnation implies that places are the seat of relations or the place of meeting and activity in the interaction between God and the world.'⁸⁰ Far from being a call to universality and globalisation, the incarnation is a challenge to honour the particular, the material, the physical as an intrinsic part of God's relationship with his people.

Such particularity then gives the place within which an event happens a significance in proportion to the event. It is not that the place then becomes holy, but that a revelatory event becomes part of the story of the place, and thus gives it a greater role to play in our understanding of God: 'it is not that some places are intrinsically holy, but that this self-revelation on the part of God is then built into their story and this makes such places worth of pilgrimage. It puts people in touch with their Christian story, their roots'.⁸¹ The fact of the incarnation does not diminish place but gives it an undeniable significance: 'Christianity is not the religion of salvation from places, it is the religion of salvation in and through places.'⁸²

In line with the ages old tradition of commemorating the site of special events with a material object, elaborate shrines have over the centuries been erected as memorials to 'the saving events of Christian history, a prophetic presence in the midst of secular society, and an eschatological sign of Gods future'⁸³. These are a focus for story and memory, they are a sign 'to the worshipping community and to all people that God is not to be forgotten'⁸⁴ and as such have been invested with a power of their own. The reasons for pilgrimage to particular shrines are discussed later in this study, but it must not be forgotten that these shrines are not only perceived as a source of power emanating from the holy man, woman or even the shrine commemorates, but as a place where that same power can be tapped into and appropriated. Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans in their study of pilgrimages to Marian shrines discovered that it is often the socially weak and vulnerable who make such journeys, which are perceived as being made from the outer edges of society and power into the very heart of it 'in order to challenge power and to

⁸⁰ Inge 2003, 57

⁸¹ Inge 2003, 100

⁸² Inge 2003, 92

⁸³ Inge 2003, x

⁸⁴ Inge 2003, 114

strengthen one's position.'⁸⁵ The power perceived to be contained by the shrine is invested in Mary by the pilgrims themselves 'with the ultimate goal of empowering themselves within certain socio political constellations in modern world'.⁸⁶ Power becomes in this instance something transactional and reciprocal – by travelling to the shrine, pilgrims invest Mary with a power that comes from an event that occurred at that place, making it significant. This power is then sought by the pilgrims as part of a system of exchange – pilgrims offer small gifts, sacrifices or vows, and in return receive power in the form of Mary's favour. This then affects the behaviour and attitude of the pilgrims towards their own situation, the event becoming part of the 'economy of the sacred'.⁸⁷

Sacred places, however, have an importance beyond simply the site of an event of significance or even the purported repository of power of a particular saint or holy person. Places are 'the fruit of civilization, an area of space that has been distinguished from other areas by the inhabitation of a community'.⁸⁸ This community interacts with the place it inhabits and together they build up the identity of each other. Inge has stated that place is 'essential to the building up of human community'⁸⁹, which can be disputed in the light of virtual communities, and will be examined in the concept of the community of the visitors book later in this study, but there can be no denying the power of a significant relationship between people and place which operates to strengthen community through the holding together by the place concerned of numerous narratives which enrich and reshape both the individual and the community. Sheldrake states that the memory 'embedded' in a place involves more than one person's story: 'there are the wider deeper narrative currents in a place that gather together all those who have ever lived there. Each person effectively reshapes a place by making his or her story a thread in the meaning of the place and also has to come to terms with the many layers of story that already exist in a given location.'⁹⁰ Many human memories are intrinsically linked with the place in which the events occurred – it is not just the lives of saints or outstanding human beings that build up the story of a community, but the hundreds of everyday events that occur within a place, 'localised in a

⁸⁵ Hermkens and Notermans 2009, 4

⁸⁶ Hermkens and Notermans 2009, 9

⁸⁷ Hermkens and Notermans 2009, 9

⁸⁸ O'Donovan 1999, 46

⁸⁹ Inge 2003, 125

⁹⁰ Sheldrake 2001, 16

landscape,⁹¹ associating themselves with the landscape in a way that produces a complex relationship between 'physical geographies and geographies of the mind and spirit'.⁹²

O Donovan writes of the need to grasp the reciprocal relation between nature and culture: geographical space mediating a possibility for human life in community; human inhabitation elevating dead space into the character and distinctness of place.⁹³ This is seen not just in a Christian or religious context but in the way the association between memory and emotions is played out in the installation of plaques on the walls of buildings where the famous have lived and the more domestic but touching laying of flowers on the site of a road accident or similar tragedy.

'Physical places are vital sources of metaphors for our social constructions of reality.'⁹⁴

Human beings need stories to build up identity, and stories need to be embedded in places to build up the associations of landscape and memory which in turn contribute to community. Travelling to sacred sites is a challenge to Christianity, a religion that needs no sacred land, people or language as 'its great locative was in Christ.'⁹⁵

However against this is the fact that the 'trinity of place, folk and story is a universal shape of human life'.⁹⁶ Stories are a fundamental part of Christianity, the stories of the life of Christ, the actions of the apostles and the activities of the early church, and each of these stories resonates with the names of communities and places – Nazareth, Galilee, Jerusalem....The events that occur in these places become part of the story of the place, and together become part of the fabric of the divine human encounter so that they 'have spoken and can still speak to people of a God who makes manifest through the material and who in Christ hallows the material'.⁹⁷

Such divine encounters in particular places are recounted and described by communities who take part of their identity from such stories. Further encounters happen on commemorative visits, and layers of story and meaning develop as the place becomes more than simply the site of a holy event, but holy in itself: 'things which confer a sense of identity on an individual are highly valued...to such an extent as to be sacralised. When this

⁹¹ Sheldrake, 13

⁹² Sheldrake 2001, 16

⁹³ O'Donovan 1999, 47

⁹⁴ Sheldrake 2001, 4

⁹⁵ McConville 2004, 18

⁹⁶ McConville 2004, 18

⁹⁷ Inge 2003, 91

occurs over long periods of time the dimension of history comes to be added to personal identity and individual experience, given a place particular cultural significance and making it very sacred.’⁹⁸

The ‘apparently irrepressible human desire to identify places where God may be especially accessible’⁹⁹ finds a growing point in places which have been singled out be the self-revelation of God to his people, or the actions and activities of those of his people with a strong and close relationship with God. These actions formed the basis of the story associated at the place, thus rendering the place itself an appropriate site for remembering that and other saving actions of God. For the medieval pilgrim, the stories of miracles effected at the tombs of saints were an indication that God wanted the tombs and the relics contained to be worshipped. For more contemporary pilgrims, with a less vivid belief in miracles, there is still the attraction of the concept of the ordinary and the divine being united for a moment: ‘rents in the opacity of history where God’s concrete engagement to change the world becomes visible’¹⁰⁰. A holy place becomes therefore a route to the divine, an opportunity to arrive at an experience of the other. O Donovan, in his exegesis of the Good Samaritan, notes that the story takes place upon the road, existing ‘only between one place and another’¹⁰¹, acting simply as a signpost to another place, but having a singular importance, because without travelling its length, the other place cannot be reached.

In this story can be seen the tension between place and placelessness. Transcendence cannot be housed, but encounter with transcendence can only occur within a given place: ‘in defining places as the seat of relations as of meeting and activity between God and humanity it allowed for the significance of places in human experience to be recognised.’¹⁰² In this respect shrines function ‘like milestones that guide the journey of the children of God on earth’.¹⁰³ Seen less as a source of power in themselves, they can instead be viewed as signposts to the divine. Within the parable of the Good Samaritan, they are the stopping places along the road to Jerusalem, rather than the destination itself. The architecture of the larger shrines and sacred places articulate this purpose, helping the community to look

⁹⁸ Holm and Bowker 1994, 53

⁹⁹ Dyas 2004, 102

¹⁰⁰ Inge 2003, 74

¹⁰¹ O’ Donovan 1999, 46

¹⁰² Inge 2003, 52

¹⁰³ Inge 2003, 104

beyond the material realm through the medium of the material realm, thus the great buildings of the Gothic era : 'expressed the limitless quality of God through the soaring verticality of arches and vaults a deliberate antithesis to human scale'.¹⁰⁴ The act of treasuring sacred relics or visiting sacred architecture could be seen as a diversion from the inner searching for truth, a way of projecting the search for God outwards rather than inwards, but can also be viewed as a recognition of the other, even while we continue in our earthbound existence. Shrines are a form of protest, writes Inge: 'against every ideology that wishes to say everything regarding in human being, because that shrine reminds us that there is another dimensions, that of the kingdom of God, that must come fully'.¹⁰⁵

The metaphor of pilgrimage and the existence of sacred places offer a sign to a greater reality. Reminders of God's self-revelation, they link place people and story together and thus tied in community they give in turn a transformed perspective on everyday places. Always, however, these places must encourage a renewed aspect upon the everyday places of community and individual living: 'remembering and revisiting places which have witnessed such events is not necessarily wrong -what is vital is that such acts of recall lead to an ever-increasing awareness that the God who has acted somewhere is to be encountered everywhere'.¹⁰⁶

A study of Binsey can offer a significant contribution to the understanding of the relationship between place, story and people. Binsey is a site with many layers, both historical and fictional – it is the subject of traditional legends of saints, as well as the actual site of a medieval retreat centre. It has featured in works of fiction, and has played an instrumental part in developing the imaginative life of authors of prose and poetry. Binsey has been the parish church for generations of inhabitants of a small riverside village, and the destination for many hundreds of tourists seeking a place of peace and tranquillity within easy distance of Oxford. In addition to this, Binsey has offered a spiritual sanctuary for visitors and pilgrims, curious day-trippers as well as seekers of comfort. In one respect, Binsey is an archetypal village church; in another its historical and literary connections give it a unique place within English Christian life.

¹⁰⁴ Inge 2003, 9

¹⁰⁵ Inge 2003, 109

¹⁰⁶ Dyas 2004, 109

4 A HISTORY OF ST MARGARET'S CHURCH, BINSEY.

The history of Binsey begins with its foundation, commonly acknowledged to be fact buried in the legend of St Frideswide. After some years of peaceful forgetfulness, the proximity of Binsey to the city of Oxford gave it a value as a destination for day trippers and excursions from that city, most notably those of Charles Dodgson, CS Lewis and Gerard Manley Hopkins. This led to an otherwise unremarkable church achieving some degree of fame through its literary and academic connections, which have continued to this day to draw visitors to the site.

'It is virtually certain that Oxford developed around a mid-Saxon monastic church (the predecessor of the present Cathedral) at a major crossing over the Thames, and that the first head of the church was a princess named Frideswide'.¹⁰⁷ The legend of St Frideswide, as she became known, is based on three sources, all from the 12th century. A brief text by William of Malmesbury seems to share its source with 'Life A' as it is known. Life B derives all but one episode from these previous sources.

Malmesbury's story is a straightforward tale of a princess pursued by a love-struck king. She runs into a wood and escapes from thence to Oxford. Still followed by the king, the princess prays earnestly for rescue, whereupon 'as he passed through the town gate with his thegns, a heaven sent blow struck him blind. Realising his wrong doing he begs Frideswide's forgiveness and thus regains his sight 'thus it came about that kings of England are afraid to enter or lodge in that town'. Frideswide is thenceforth left in peace to found a monastery in Oxford 'secure in her maidenly victory'.

Life A embroiders this simple tale, adding details such as the names of Frideswide's parents – Didan and Sefrida 'a godly woman diligent in all good works', the king and queen of Oxford. It is Didan, asserts Life A, who founds the monastery where Frideswide wishes to live, this being a typical event of Saxon times, with religious houses ruled by royal leaders 'Revered Frideswide asked her father, the same King Didan, to give her the church, and he gave her the church'. Frideswide's royal suitor is named as Algar, king of Leicester, a 'most villainous man, hateful to God' This is typical of medieval hagiography, but equally could have some relation to the truth in an era when the kidnapping of reluctant brides was not

¹⁰⁷ Blair 2014, forthcoming

unknown. On falling in love with Frideswide, he sends men to plead his suit. Upon her refusal, they try to kidnap her but 'as the holy virgin spoke their eyes were struck blind'. When they repent they are healed and return to Algar who, undeterred by their tales of sudden blindness sets out in person 'mad with rage and fury' to capture the princess. Frideswide, however, is warned of his approach by an angel and she escapes to the river Thames. A boatman 'with a gleaming angelic face' transports her to Bampton where she hides in a wood called Binsey. Algar is struck blind as he enters Oxford but does not repent and he remains blind 'all the days of his life, always plotting and scheming to injure blessed Frideswide'. She remains at Bampton for three years, working many miracles. On her return to Oxford, her monastic life continues, as do the miracles which continue to occur even on the occasion of her funeral.

One of the main problems with the manuscript called 'Life A', is the way in which the writer has apparently confused the village of Bampton, which is thirteen miles distant from Oxford, with that of Binsey which is only two miles from the city centre. Blair asserts that there were separate legends of Frideswide at Bampton and Binsey 'both involving miracles and Life A has conflated and confused them'.¹⁰⁸ The task of untangling the confusion was given to the 12th century Prior of St Frideswide, Prior Robert, who inserted an entire chapter into the legend, transporting Frideswide from Bampton to Binsey. In this section, Frideswide and her companions set out for Oxford but decide to pause at Binsey for a period of retreat: 'she decided that it would be useful to stay for a short while outside the city and devote themselves to sweet tranquillity'.

They find an isolated, rural place called Thornbury where they 'straightway built an oratory, and many buildings well suited to the needs of holy people' In addition to this, 'she obtained by her prayers a well which remain to this day and performs healing works for many who drink from it.' As well as untangling the tale, this chapter usefully served to substantiate the Priory's claims to the territory of Binsey, reinforcing their mutual relationship.

Blair, having demythologised the story presents the truth of the legend of St Frideswide thus: 'In the late seventh century a territory west of the Cherwell and north of the Thames was ruled, under the overlordship of Mercia, by a sub king called Dida. His kingdom

¹⁰⁸ Blair 2014, forthcoming

probably included both Bampton and Oxford though his headquarters may have been at the already ancient centre of Eynsham. Following contemporary fashion, he built and endowed at Oxford a double monastery, possibly dependent on a slightly older and more important monastery at Eynsham, and made his daughter Frithuswith its first abbess. She spent part of her life at two other religious centres in her father's kingdom: Bampton, later recorded as a royal vill and minster church, and Binsey, much nearer to Oxford, which may have been attached to her own community. She died on 19 October 727 and was buried in her monastery, which became the nucleus of the nascent town of Oxford.¹⁰⁹

St Frideswide's bones were translated to a shrine in the Priory in 1180 and into an even better one in 1289 but never became a major pilgrimage centre. The Priory itself was suppressed during the Reformation and the shrine destroyed in a fire in the 1530s. Large pieces of a 13th century shrine were discovered in a well in 1875, and the shrine was restored in 2002.

'St Margaret's, Binsey, has several attractive architectural and archaeological features but in fact does not possess a great deal to detain the casual tourist.'¹¹⁰ However, simple though the building is, it has a rich spiritual and temporal history, which is worth examining in order to set this research in context.

The church itself is dedicated to St Margaret of Antioch, but the well is associated with St Frideswide, a Saxon saint, perhaps an indication of two different Christian communities trying to draw together in the local operation of their faith: 'the pairing of these two saints, the early Eastern martyr and the regional princess-nun reveals the deep desire of the Roman and the British churches to localize their faith'.¹¹¹ Henig discusses two possibilities for the origins of Binsey as a religious site. Firstly he posits Binsey as 'reflecting a Romano-British Christianity that was becoming established even in the countryside from the later 4th century'.¹¹² This site, he says could have been established within the remains of an Iron Age and Roman village which had become 'the refuge of holy men and women', seeking an isolated place to communicate with God. His alternative suggestion is that of a later settlement, around the 8th century, the Anglo Saxon church simply using an Iron Age base

¹⁰⁹ Blair 2014, forthcoming

¹¹⁰ Henig 2014 forthcoming

¹¹¹ Carr 2014 forthcoming

¹¹² Henig 2014 forthcoming (b)

out of convenience. Either way, 'this place served as a spiritual power house for Frideswide, to pass her time in illuminating or copying texts or simply in prayer and contemplation.'¹¹³ This early building would have been very simple, 'never more than a few wattle and daub huts, possibly with a small chapel attached. It never even had its own regular hermit or anchorite, even though in the 12th century, prior to founding the nunnery at Godstow just up river, lady Edith Lancelene spent time in retreat at Binsey where 'muche holy lyfe she ledde'.¹¹⁴ Instead, the chapel, which was attached to the manor house, belonged to St Frideswide Priory.

According to legend, it was from Binsey that St Frideswide set out to found her priory in Oxford, and it may be that the site was retained by her as a retreat centre, but this is not documented. Nothing remains of this Saxon church, and the earliest surviving stonework appears to be Norman. It is well documented as a pilgrimage site – Henry VIII is reported to have visited the well, and standing as it did on a major roadway between Eynsham and Oxford, Binsey would have been accessible enough for medieval pilgrims to consider it worth either a detour or a journey in its own right. The chapel and its buildings were annexed by Cardinal Wolsey as part of his plans to form Cardinal College on the site of the Priory in Oxford. Subsequent to this, when Christ Church was founded in 1546 after the dissolution of St Frideswide's Priory by Henry VIII the College was granted 'the manor and rectory of Binsey and the chapel of St Margaret's Binsey'¹¹⁵. The Dean and Chapter of Christ Church were also given the right to appoint clergy for Binsey; even today the college is involved in the appointment of the clergy in its role as patron of the parish.

During the Reformation, Binsey suffered the same fate as other pilgrimage destinations, and became gradually less fashionable and less well kept. The Oxford antiquary Antony Wood wrote in the 1660s that the well house had been pulled down in 1639.¹¹⁶ He calls the church 'forlorne and naked'¹¹⁷, an epithet which seems to cling to Binsey church throughout the centuries. However, during the 19th century, the revival of interest in the medieval era and all things Gothic gave a new impetus to the notion of pilgrimage and small sacred sites, and the fortunes of Binsey began to improve.

¹¹³ Henig 2014 forthcoming

¹¹⁴ Henig 2014 forthcoming

¹¹⁵ Dewhurst 2014 forthcoming

¹¹⁶ Munby 2014 forthcoming

¹¹⁷ Munby 2014 forthcoming

Simon, chaplain of Thornbury, imprisoned in Oxford in 1293, was the only recorded medieval chaplain. After the Reformation almost all the chaplains or curates were students of Christ Church; their stay was often brief and many of them had little to do with the village. The first Sunday school in the village was founded by William Corne in 1818, and the influential Charles Lloyd ministered at Binsey between 1818 and 1820 before becoming Regius Professor of Divinity in 1822 and Bishop of Oxford in 1827.

Binsey church owes most of its renovation work to T J Prout, who restored the well and the inside of the church during his time at Binsey.¹¹⁸ From 1919 the living was held with Wytham until 1950 when it was joined with St Frideswide's Church on the Botley Road. In 2009 it was merged with North Hinksey, remaining separate parishes within the benefice. Today Binsey is cared for by a team of clergy and holds regular services attended faithfully by a small number of Binsey residents and others. However, although its physical and numerical impact on the Christian community is small, the spiritual impact is highly significant, as this study will demonstrate.

The earliest surviving stonework of the church building itself is the Norman arch of the entrance porch, but any further evidence of Norman architecture has been lost in a 'substantial rebuild'¹¹⁹ which took place in the 13th century. The chancel is of this period, although its roof appears to be 14th century. Munby writes that 'The Royal Commission Inventory dates the nave and chancel windows to the 15th century though the nave ones may be older than the chancel'.¹²⁰ The nave roof appears to be of a later construction than that of the chancel, possible dating from the 16th century.

There remains no ancient church furniture with the possible exception of the Norman bowl of the font. Fragments of medieval glass are collected in the east window with a various heads and a mooted pilgrim. The rest of the furniture dates from Prout's vigorous restoration, which included pews, a reading desk and a pulpit. Other features include a carved reredos from a former convent in Littlemore, a 13th century piscine and monuments to the Prickett and Tawney families. The church still has no electricity and a foot operated harmonium is used for services.¹²¹

¹¹⁸ See Appendix 1

¹¹⁹ Munby 2014 forthcoming

¹²⁰ Munby 2014 forthcoming

¹²¹ See Appendix 2

The well at St Margaret's owes its present structure to T J Prout, but has been in existence since medieval times.¹²² There is evidence that some holy wells contain minerals that do go some way towards healing various complaints – Lydney Park in Gloucestershire, for example, has a high iron content in its water, which could have effected cures amongst people afflicted with anaemia.¹²³ However 'there is no evidence of any chemical content of this type in the water at Binsey',¹²⁴ so any cures would have to be either miraculous or psychological!

The village of Binsey¹²⁵ lies some distance from St Margaret's church, which although considered part of Binsey is also known by its medieval name as Thornbury, the place where St Frideswide first took refuge from her erstwhile captors. The whole of the village of Binsey belonged to St. Frideswide's priory from an early date, and was said traditionally to have been given to St. Frideswide herself. The village lies at the end of a long single lane track leading from the busy Botley road, and the noise of the Oxford ring road destroys the illusion otherwise present of a tiny hamlet buried in the depth of the countryside. The other way to access Binsey is the half mile footpath leading from the Thames path. Those seeking refreshment from the Perch Tavern occasionally walk the extra half mile that leads to the ancient Thornbury with its small church.

The houses of Binsey are strung out in a row along from the Perch; they consist of some dozen 18th and 19th century cottages, with slate or thatched roofs. Along Binsey Lane is a large farmhouse, probably 17th century.

The lane from the village to the church was laid out when the fields of Binsey were enclosed in the 1820s. The ford at Binsey across to Port Meadow was used by the villages to give access to the Meadow to graze their cattle there, a right which they vigorously laid claim to. The fortunes of Binsey probably stem from its popularity as a pilgrim site: in 1381 44 Binsey inhabitants were assessed for poll-tax, although not all of them came from the village itself. ¹²⁶ In 1668 48 people paid poll-tax and but by 1773 there were 11 houses in Binsey, 5 of them in disrepair, and a twelfth house had fallen down some years earlier. By

¹²² See Appendix 7

¹²³ Carr 2014 forthcoming

¹²⁴ Carr 2014 forthcoming

¹²⁵ See Appendix 3

¹²⁶ Crossley and Ellington 1979 fn77

the 19th century there were still only about 50 residents in the village, and this number remained stable into the early 20th century.¹²⁷

In 1279 the prior of St. Frideswide's held Binsey, and with the dissolution of St. Frideswide's the village became the property firstly of Cardinal College, then in 1532 to Henry VIII's College, then in 1546 to Christ Church.

The memorials within the church make reference to some of the families who have been associated with Binsey over the years. The Pricketts are a family with a long association with the village, dating back to 1598 when a document found in the archives of Christ Church College cite Robert Prickett as 'one of several Binsey residents complaining that they were prohibited from keeping cattle on Port Meadow'.¹²⁸ The Pricketts appear as licence holders for the Perch Tavern, as yeoman farmers, and, most famously, Mary Prickett was the governess of Alice Liddell, inspiration for Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland. Other families too dominate the church registers – the Hearne family appear at the beginning and continue until the 18th century, as do the Crutch family whose last surviving member died in 1719.¹²⁹ However, it is not these Binsey families whose associations are those most commonly quoted – other, far more significant names have been linked with the village and church in the past.

Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844 – 1889) was an undergraduate at Oxford University, and for a while was known as 'the star of Balliol', that being his college. This brief success came to an end, however, when he was one of four undergraduates accepted into the Catholic Church in 1866. This action caused an uproar at the University and was further exacerbated when Hopkins was accepted as a member of the Society of Jesus. After his novitiate and training, Hopkins was sent back to Oxford for a period of about ten months in about 1878, when he lived in the presbytery of St Aloysius on St Giles. Although not a happy time for Hopkins, the poems he wrote while living in Oxford are intense and beautiful, filled with a longing for a sense of place and a feeling of rootedness. His poem 'On Binsey Poplars' will be discussed at greater length later in this work, but fans of Hopkins, just like fans of Carroll and Lewis, have all made their way to Binsey church to pay homage to this source of inspiration for much admired authors.

¹²⁷ Crossley and Ellington 1979 fn81

¹²⁸ Davies 2014 forthcoming

¹²⁹ Boardman 2014 forthcoming

CS Lewis was another famous literary figure who was attracted by the 'melancholy'¹³⁰ of Binsey. A regular at The Perch tavern, he writes in his diary for 21 November 1922 of having taken a friend 'in poor form', Jenkins, to a 'sad church by a woodside'. Together they explored the interior of the church and 'shuffled through a lot of dead leaves among the graves'.¹³¹ That Binsey remained a significant geographical feature in Lewis' life is given weight by his correspondence with Sheldon Vanauken, author of 'A Severe Mercy', an autobiography which deals with Vanauken's marriage and conversion to Catholicism and contains several excerpts from Lewis' letters. Lewis introduced Vanauken to Binsey and the ashes of both he and his wife are scattered in the churchyard. However, both Hopkins and Lewis must take second place to the most famous literary connection of Binsey, that of Charles Dodgson, otherwise known as Lewis Carroll.

In 1855 Henry Liddell was appointed Dean of Christ Church. He had been an undergraduate at Christ Church and had gained first class degrees in classics and mathematics. He worked at the University in various roles, among them domestic chaplain to Queen Victoria, before taking on the headship of Westminster School. He had married Lorina Reeve in 1846 and by the time the Liddells arrived at Christ Church there were three girls and one boy in the family. A further two girls and two boys were born during Liddells time at the College, with a further two boys dying in infancy.

Charles Lutwidge Dodgson came up to the university in 1851, gained a third in classics and a first in mathematics and by a stroke of good fortune was appointed lecturer in mathematics in 1855, although he did not take up the post until January 1856. It was during this time that he became acquainted with the Liddell children, who had been left in the care of their governess Mary Prickett, while their parents wintered in Madeira for the sake of Liddell's health, which had suffered whilst he was at Westminster School. Mary was the daughter of James Prickett, a butler at Trinity College, who came from Binsey, and it is here that the famous 'Lewis Carroll – Binsey' connection began.

Dodgson began to spend time with the children and their governess, telling stories, inventing games and entering into family life. Even after the return of the Dean and his wife from their winter excursions, Dodgson remained a frequent visitor to the Liddell family, taking photographs of them and planning outings and trips. It was one of these

¹³⁰ Hooper 2002

¹³¹ Hooper 2002

trips, a river excursion from Folly Bridge to Godstow that was to prove the trigger for Dodgson's children's work 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland'.

The trip was made on 4 July 1862 and consisted of the three older Liddell sisters; Lorina aged thirteen at the time, Alice aged ten and eight year old Edith. They were accompanied by a friend of the family, Reverend Robinson Duckworth, and Dodgson himself. During the course of this voyage, which would have taken some hours, Dodgson invented the fantastical tale of Alice and her adventures in an imaginary world peopled with characters from the girls' life. As Wakeling writes: 'Alice was herself, of course, but Lorina was the Lory (a kind of small parrot), Edith was the eaglet, Dodgson was the dodo, and Duckworth was the duck. Other characters may have been instantly recognisable to the children – the rude and rather abrupt marchioness (later to become the duchess) was probably based on their governess, Miss Prickett'.¹³²

At the end of the trip, Alice asked Dodgson to write down the adventures, which he duly did, beginning the manuscript on 13 November 1862 and finishing on 2 February 1863. The book, with illustrations by Tenniel was published in 1865 by the Clarendon Press. Binsey church features in the book as the site of the 'treacle well' which forms part of a story told to Alice by the Dormouse during the Mad Hatter's tea party:

"Once upon a time there were three little sisters," the Dormouse began in a great hurry; "and their names were Elsie, Lacie, and Tillie; and they lived at the bottom of a well –"

"What did they live on?" said Alice, who always took a great interest in questions of eating and drinking.

"They lived on treacle," said the Dormouse, after thinking a minute or two.

"They couldn't have done that, you know," Alice gently remarked; "they'd have been ill."

"So they were," said the Dormouse; "very ill."

Alice tried to fancy to herself what such an extraordinary way of living would be like, but it puzzled her too much: so she went on: "But why did they live at the bottom of a well?"

"Take some more tea," the March Hare said to Alice, very earnestly.

"I've had nothing yet," Alice replied in an offended tone, "so I ca'n't take more."

¹³² Wakeling 2014 forthcoming

"You mean you ca'n't take less," said the Hatter: "it's very easy to take more than nothing."

"Nobody asked your opinion," said Alice.

"Who's making personal remarks now?" the Hatter asked triumphantly.

Alice did not quite know what to say to this: so she helped herself to some tea and bread-and-butter, and then turned to the Dormouse, and repeated her question. "Why did they live at the bottom of a well?"

The Dormouse again took a minute or two to think about it, and then said, "It was a treacle-well."

"There's no such thing!" Alice was beginning very angrily, but the Hatter and the March Hare went "Sh! sh!" and the Dormouse sulkily remarked, "If you ca'n't be civil, you'd better finish the story for yourself."

"No, please go on!" Alice said very humbly; "I wo'n't interrupt you again. I dare say there may be one."

"One, indeed!" said the Dormouse indignantly. However, he consented to go on. "And so these three little sisters – they were learning to draw, you know – "

"What did they draw?" said Alice, quite forgetting her promise.

"Treacle," said the Dormouse, without considering at all, this time.

"I want a clean cup," interrupted the Hatter: "let's all move one place on."

He moved on as he spoke, and the Dormouse followed him: the March Hare moved into the Dormouse's place, and Alice rather unwillingly took the place of the March Hare. The Hatter was the only one who got any advantage from the change; and Alice was a good deal worse off than before, as the March Hare had just upset the milk-jug into his plate.

Alice did not wish to offend the Dormouse again, so she began very cautiously: "But I don't understand. Where did they draw the treacle from?"

"You can draw water out of a water-well," said the Hatter; "so I should think you could draw treacle out of a treacle-well – eh, stupid?"

"But they were in the well," Alice said to the Dormouse, not choosing to notice this last remark.

"Of course they were," said the Dormouse: "well in."

The girls are clearly the stars of the passage, Elsie" – or L. C. – is Lorina Charlotte, "Lacie" is an anagram of Alice, and "Tillie" is short for Matilda, the pet-name given to the youngest,

Edith¹³³. The treacle well is, of course, the healing well at St Margaret's church, with amongst other puns of Dodgson, allusion to the medieval word for healing liquid 'treacle'. The girls may have visited Binsey church on that same trip along the river, taking the half mile detour along the lane to the small church hidden among the trees, or they may have been taken there at other times by their governess, Mary Prickett, to visit living relatives or the graves of those buried in the churchyard.

Amongst the many reasons for visiting Binsey church given in the visitors book, a mention of 'Alice' or the 'treacle well' is found twenty two times. Although this accounts for only one per cent of the visitors, there can be no doubt that many people find their way to this hidden spot marked out by a story in one of Oxford's most famous storybooks.

However, the literary associations of Binsey church remain but one reason for its popularity. A study of the visitors books in the church gives an insight into the many and varied reasons that are given for the attraction of Binsey for a surprisingly numerous and disparate number of visitors. By examining entries in the visitors' books, something of the effect of Binsey on the visitor can be discerned, as well as its influence on the spiritual and psychological wellbeing of those who journey to this small, out of the way church.

¹³³ Wakeling 2014 forthcoming

5 METHOD AND OUTLINE OF STUDY

Since 1961, St Margaret of Antioch, Binsey, has had an 'open door' policy. The church is left open day and night for people who wish to visit the church for whatever reason. Visitors are also invited to contribute to the visitors' books that have been left in the church, on a small table just on the right by the door, occasionally with a pen supplied for inscriptions. Of the resulting 15 visitors' books, 9, dating from 1961 to 1999 have been deposited with the Oxfordshire History Archives, 3, dating from 2002 – 2009, are held by the churchwarden and 1, dating from 2011, is currently in use. The other two or more, covering the period 2000 – 2002 and 2009 – 2011 are missing.

The earliest visitors' books are very simple, being traditional hard backed visitors' books often found in country houses. The books contain no provision for anything other than the most basic information – that of the names and addresses of those who chose to write in the book. There is no comment column in the books and no comments are to be found in the margins or elsewhere. The books are very formal in approach and give little information except that of the most general type. As the date of the books gets more recent, there can be perceived a change in attitude to the books, both by those who provide them and those who write in them. A column is left for comments, and sometimes, although not frequently, the column has been filled in. However, the comments are very basic and consist most often of one or two words, in the category of comments on the church architecture 'very beautiful', the atmosphere of the church 'very peaceful' or a simple in memoriam 'RIP xxx'. There are very few requests for prayer, and those that there are simply say 'please pray for....', but this may well be because the format of a visitors' book does not invite prayer very specifically. Even events of national as well as local significance, such as the death of Princess Diana in August 1991 merit few comments 'For Diana and those who died with her RIP'.

Because of the missing book from 2000 - 2002, it is difficult to pinpoint when the way in which these documents were used changed from a simple factual entry to the repository of the thoughts, prayers, literary contributions and general conversation that exists in the more recent books. This is a matter of some regret from a research point of view, but it did enable a clear start and end point for further investigation. Since there is a significant difference in amount of information given and the style in which it is written in the visitors'

books from before 2000 and those from 2002 onwards, it was decided to focus research on the three books from 2002 to 2009, including some comments from the current book, which dates from 2011. Even with these limitations, the amount of material available was in sufficient quantity and in sufficient depth as to justify confining research to these three books.

These three books were not specially designed for visitors, being instead small hardback notebooks, about 14cm x 12 cm, with lined pages but no columns or other indication as to the suggested length or type of entry. It is possibly this very lack of directive that gave the writers in these notebooks the scope to write as freely as they did on all sorts of subjects; most people when given a book with columns for name and address but no space for free comment adhered to the implicit rules and made no additional entries; we have the poverty of the church to thank for the plainness of the notebooks which gave implicit permission for entries as personal and poetic as they proceeded to be.

In all, a total of 2,657 entries were made in the visitors' books between July 2002 and July 2009. Of these, 882 simply wrote their name and address, just their name or just their place of origin, but did not write any additional comments. Of the 1,775 who left additional comments, 923 just wrote a name and added a comment but did not give a place of origin, 186 gave no name, but simply a place of origin and a comment, and 344 gave neither a name nor a place but only wrote a comment. There was no appreciable difference in style or content to those who chose total anonymity for their comments and those who were happy to attach a full name and precise address to what they wrote.

Of all the entries which gave a place of origin, 25% of visitors were from the UK, 12% stipulating Oxford as their residence. This equates with the number of entries which referred to repeat visits, some of them very frequent – one visitor signed the book 17 times in 21 days. Such visits could only occur if the visitor lived nearby. Outside the UK, the next largest group was from the USA, with 280 entries (10%). Other visitors entered countries from all over the world, including Japan, Korea, France, Germany, Albania, Bolivia, Cyprus, Columbia, Iceland, India and Syria, totalling 70 different countries in all. Some of these entries were not in English, and for the purposes of this research they were not included, as identifying and then translating the entries proved to be a task too great for the researcher!

It was originally planned to provide additional structure to the analysis of the comments by dividing them into those with 'spiritual' and 'non-spiritual' content, as in the research carried out by Morris and Burton's examination of a visitors' book in a small rural church.¹³⁴ They found that over a twelve year period, 52% of entries had no spiritual content and focussed mainly on the church building and its contents 'the centre of attention was the kneelers and hassocks'¹³⁵. They define entries with spiritual content as 'those which by their nature indicate that the building and the visit generated some kind of reaction which prompted them to feel some spiritual benefit.'¹³⁶ However, examination of Binsey's entries revealed that such a division would not be simple. Morris and Burton place comments on the celebration of personal anniversaries and the tracing of family connections as having no spiritual content, but this would not be the case for Binsey: 'Jess and Marc's first wedding anniversary. We're so glad to be here today and that this church is still part of our lives one year on. Just as magical as ever'. Similarly the tracing of family history does not confine itself easily into the non-spiritual category: 'thank you for his final resting place'. Keulemans and Burton¹³⁷ undertook research in a church more similar to that of St Margaret's when they surveyed visitors to the shrine of St Melangell. There, although 'it became clear that for churchgoers the spiritual motivation was overwhelming', it was also found that even for non-churchgoers 'the spiritual motive was by no means absent',¹³⁸ and this was in a survey that enabled such distinctions, unlike the examination of evidence presented without mediation or interpretation such as that found in a visitors' book. It was thus decided not to attempt to draw distinctions between comments with a spiritual or non-spiritual content, especially since within the paradigms of Ordinary Theology, this is in itself placing artificial restrictions and judgements on 'the content pattern and processes of ordinary people's articulation of their spiritual or religious understanding'.¹³⁹ Accordingly, all entries were treated in the same way, and the categorisation undertaken at a more particular level, with the preoccupations and conversation of the entries being examined in the context of their relationship both to the theology of pilgrimage and to their relationship with their physical surroundings and the rest of the entries in the book.

¹³⁴ Morris and Burton 2012, 57

¹³⁵ Morris and Burton 2012, 57

¹³⁶ Morris and Burton 2012, 57

¹³⁷ Keulemans and Burton 2012, 193

¹³⁸ Keulemans and Burton 2012, 193

¹³⁹ Astley 2012, 44

Some of the results of visitor surveys from other churches had much in common with the entries in Binsey's books. Littler, Francis and Martineau using statistics drawn from a national visitors survey in 2001 list only 1% of visitors to churches as being interested in tracing family history.¹⁴⁰ This corresponds on one level with 0.7% of Binsey entries referring to graves or family history. However, some of those entries reflect more than an interest in burial sites but include an element of memorial also: 'Rupert and I, Tessa came down today to visit John van der Post. It is now 22 years since he died and we miss him terribly'.

In a similar way, Littler, Francis and Martineau discerned the importance placed on 'being able to withdraw, albeit briefly from the world and find a place of peace and tranquillity.'¹⁴¹ This is echoed in Binsey with 21% of visitors referring to a sense of peace or commenting on the peacefulness or tranquillity of the church. Again, Littler, Francis and Martineau discovered that this importance was 'often expressed by people wishing to say thank you for this opportunity to escape from the pressures of the world.'¹⁴² Of the 1775 comments in Binsey's books, 334 (19%) of them contained an expression of gratitude, 143 (8%) of these mentioning thanks for the church being open, a similar figure to the 10% of Littler et al's study.

Of the respondents to Keulemans and Burtons questionnaire, 72% wanted to pray. For Binsey the entries referring to prayer were fewer, only 242(13%) mentioning God or prayer or both. However, this could be because a visitors' book, as opposed to a prayer board or prayer cards for example, does not immediately present itself as a place to write or ask for prayers.

Littler and Francis identify three characteristics of a 'holy' rural church. These are 'a place where it is possible to find somewhere quiet to pray', a place that is 'actively used by the local Christian community' and 'a place where fresh flowers are in evidence.'¹⁴³ Morris and Burton find a similar appreciation of a place to 'experience a sense of tranquillity.'¹⁴⁴ Binsey's books share this appreciation of peace but the existence of fresh flowers makes little impact on visitors who have been entranced by the beauty of the countryside

¹⁴⁰ Littler, Francis and Martineau 2012, 182

¹⁴¹ Littler, Francis and Martineau 2012, 183

¹⁴² Littler, Francis and Martineau 2012, 184

¹⁴³ Littler, Francis and Martineau 2012, 184

¹⁴⁴ Morris and Burton 2012, 70

surrounding the church (11% mention this). In this they share more in common with visitors to St Melangell's shrine, who find that 'its sense of holiness is undoubtedly enhanced by its remoteness and inaccessibility'.¹⁴⁵ However, there are features within the visitors' books at Binsey that appear to be unique to that place and as such merit not only further study but also deserve to be taken into consideration when reflecting on the theology of contemporary pilgrimage as articulated by the pilgrims themselves. These include the literary connections of Binsey (see above), and how they reflect and contribute to the spirituality of the place, the element of discovery, and most particularly and significantly, the sense of community that develops within the visitors' books themselves, with entries not merely justifying the visit by virtue of family association 'my gt gt gt grandfather buried here' but by frequency of visit 'back again' 'here again and again', devotion to the church 'beloved Binsey' and willingness to engage in conversation with the rest of the community of the book 'Binsey feels a bit neglected, would you not offer a few flowers?' 'Left in peace for now, not neglected, and the flowers are waiting for spring'.

It is these characteristics of Binsey's books that this study will try to locate within a theology of pilgrimage in order to discern both similarity and difference. The following chapter will examine in further detail the relationship of the experience of visitors to Binsey to both the traditional and contemporary experiences of pilgrimage, both on the journey and at the destination itself.

¹⁴⁵ Keulemans and Burton 2012, 189

6 THE JOURNEY

Michel de Certeau in his work dedicated to the 'anonymous hero' of the 'river of the streets', considers 'stories of space' through the medium of the maps which describe those spaces.¹⁴⁶ He charts the development of the first maps, which originated from medieval itineraries 'chiefly concerning pilgrimages'. These, he states were concerned chiefly with the places one would pass through and their significance to the pilgrim, such as overnight stops and where to obtain food. Distances were given as the number of days or hours it would take to cover the route on foot.¹⁴⁷ Between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries, these maps became more autonomous. They still contain the illustrations that made the making of the map possible, such as the picture of the sailing ship on the ocean, the which ship enabled the accurate charting of the coastline, but these too are gradually eroded, and only the impersonal, the objective is left.

This section proposes to examine the experience of pilgrimage using the traditional medieval itinerary as a guide. Tracing the journey of the medieval pilgrim from their home community, to the shrine of their destination and thence back home again, it will examine experiences along the way and compare them with the experience of the contemporary 'pilgrim' to Binsey, deciding only at the end whether today's traveller earns the title pilgrim. This research will look again at the process of pilgrimage from its original viewpoint, that of the pilgrims themselves, and examine what they say about it in their own language, unmediated by the imposition of theoretical language or observation. In this way, something of the original itinerary that lies beneath the theological map will be brought once again to the surface.

6.1 Community

For the medieval pilgrim, setting out for a pilgrimage was a truly awe inspiring activity. Although he would be walking in the footsteps of other pilgrims, it is unlikely that he himself would have ever moved far beyond the boundaries of his home community. He would only be aware of what was happening beyond the borders of his nearest town through the conversation of other travellers – merchants, vagrants or pilgrims like himself. The wealthier pilgrims might have seen an itinerary such as those contained within the Codex Calixtinus, one of the earliest documents describing the journey to Santiago.

¹⁴⁶ De Certeau 1984 passim

¹⁴⁷ De Certeau 1984, 121

However, this privilege would have been reserved for the very few; the rest would rely on word of mouth. More significant than the act of physical bravery required to step out on the first stage of a pilgrim journey, was the psychological act of tearing oneself away from the home community, with its relationships and traditions that dictated a way of life so restricted by social organisation that today's traveller can only imagine it.

The main social organisation for the medieval pilgrim would have been his parish, which was in those times both a 'geographical and social reality.'¹⁴⁸ This would be where he was born, where the vast majority of his family lived, where he worked. The parish church was where he would worship, the parish church where he gave his tithes, along with the owner of the land he farmed, and the parish churchyard where he would be buried alongside his ancestors. 'For centuries the parish represented the society of memory; its incorporation of every inhabitant into at least a potential community linked to a chain stretching from past to future occurred naturally; and the expression of this was the central position of the church in the village, with the cemetery surrounding the building where the community gathered'.¹⁴⁹ The entire geographical cocoon was mirrored by a social one – participation in community was not only important, it was vital for physical and psychological survival. There could be no opting out of the round of agricultural, social and religious obligations if one was to maintain one's place as an accepted member of the community – and outside the community was only to be found isolation and exclusion. To decide to undertake a pilgrimage was to tear oneself physically and mentally away from the bonds of community that had been wrapped around the pilgrim since before birth – the effort and energy to be expended was huge. It is easy to imagine that much pressure would be placed upon the erstwhile pilgrim to desist from his choice of action, particularly since medieval thought focussed not on earthly travels but spiritual: 'the primary understanding of pilgrimage inherited by the medieval church was not that of journeying to holy places but the Biblical concept of Christians as pilgrims and strangers who travel through the exile of this world towards the heavenly Jerusalem'¹⁵⁰ Preaching and teaching in the local church would emphasise stability, commitment, seeking God in the place where they were, with 'participation as a key element in being effectively placed'.¹⁵¹ Travelling away from this centre of stability 'was possibly unnecessary, involved expense and sometimes physical if

¹⁴⁸ Sheldrake 2005, 12

¹⁴⁹ Hervieu Leger 2000, 133

¹⁵⁰ Dyas 2004, 94

¹⁵¹ Sheldrake 2005, 10

not moral danger, and meant leaving one's daily responsibilities usually for a long period of time'.¹⁵²

This, then was the world the medieval pilgrim put aside as he set out on his journey. It was a world of stability, continuity and community. Life was hard, often harsh and full of suffering: Russell argues that what is now seen as rural simplicity and community spirit 'was in reality the brotherhood of hard work and poverty and the sisterhood of keeping house in circumstance where hunger, dirt and disease were almost ever present'.¹⁵³ 'Blood, sweat and hunger are well known as strong social adhesives and much that is now called the loss of community spirit in fact refers to the passing of these primitive conditions in rural England'.¹⁵⁴ However, the back breaking, never-ending effort of trying to wrest enough nutrients from the land to ensure continued survival was offset by the inbuilt assurance of an established place in the community, being part of something greater than oneself, and with the ever-present shadow of the parish church continually pointing the way beyond the temporary sufferings of this world towards the eternal bliss of the next: 'the aim of all true medieval pilgrims was not in the final analysis to see Jerusalem but to see Jesus'.¹⁵⁵

This extreme would obviously only have operated if the pilgrim were undertaking one of the lengthier journeys, such as to the popular destinations of Santiago de Compostela, Rome or that most prized of all, Jerusalem. Many lesser pilgrimages were made more frequently, to local sites for more minor reasons. Even these, however, involved a significant degree of preparation – permission had to be given for a peasant to leave the land he worked, blessing sought from the priest and agreement from the family to carry his burden of work and responsibility while he was away. Even a day trip was a major commitment, as the community owned an individual's time as well as his space.

For today's pilgrim to Binsey, however lengthy the journey, the impact of leaving is considerably less. Community, 'a product of instinct and heredity in given circumstances and historical frameworks' has been superseded by society 'held together by the exercise of human rational freedom, a sympathy of aim',¹⁵⁶ and the bonds are correspondingly looser. No longer is the pilgrim tied to a particular place, depending on it for his economic

¹⁵² Dyas 2004, 101

¹⁵³ Russell 1986, 44

¹⁵⁴ Russell 1986, 44

¹⁵⁵ Dyas 2004, 107

¹⁵⁶ O'Donovan 1999, 44

and social survival, instead a 'growing emphasis on mobility and the growing relativity of space has dissolved for many people the reality of place identity'.¹⁵⁷ Place, Inge argues, has been 'annihilated through time'. Pilgrims now inhabit a 'global village', where anyone in the world can be contacted at any time, People do not relate to others in the same place but to people with the same interest from much further afield'¹⁵⁸ but this progress has its correlation in a dissolution of social coherence and its attachment to place. A pilgrimage is no longer a difficult, dangerous task, nor does it demand the huge effort of emotional energy to tear oneself away from community ties stretching back from generations. Today's inhabitant of the western world certainly, travels much more lightly. Mobility is important, relationships that connect to one place are less so. Places themselves have become more homogeneous – MacDonald's is everywhere. Society has become more flexible - the expression 'liquid modernity' was coined by Zygmunt Bauman to articulate the explosion of choice that affected every area of life.¹⁵⁹ The move from place determining one's life to a life style defined by what an individual consumes has been explosive: 'Choice began to unbox people from their lifestyles'.¹⁶⁰ The postmodern world is mysterious, full of complexity and ambiguity. It communicates through the visual and symbolic and seeks an interrelation between all things but the freedom that the 'annihilation of space through time'¹⁶¹ has brought, has its disadvantages. Today's traveller suffers no 'enforced commitment' but neither can they call upon 'resources that offer mutual comfort and support', being forced instead to endure the 'often unbearable sense of isolation of having to stand on one's own'.¹⁶²

The medieval pilgrim left behind stability, community and to a large extent, identity, which was tied up in place, in 'home'. The contemporary pilgrim has fewer ties, much less sense of rootedness; he has already perhaps seen his destination in books, pictures, the social media; he has a much clearer sense of where he is going, but perhaps knows far less well where he has come from.

Many echoes of this can be found in the visitors' book entries. As discussed in Chapter 2, fewer than half of the entries with comments included their place of origin – perhaps this

¹⁵⁷ Sheldrake 2005, 148

¹⁵⁸ Moynagh 2004, 72

¹⁵⁹ Bauman 2000 passim

¹⁶⁰ Lomax and Moynagh 2004, 6

¹⁶¹ Inge 2003, 9

¹⁶² Hervieu Leger 2000, 133

was because where they came from had little significance in making up who they were. Those that did leave a place of origin often included only their country – nationality is of some importance and greater than that of a specific place is the need to belong to a country. However, a country is a large amount of space, and perhaps lacks the locality necessary for it to feel like a place. Instead what mention of community, of belonging seems to have been relocated from the home to that of Binsey. The place is called upon for the sort of support that might in previous times have been expected from family and friends: ‘Hello again Binsey. I think I need your help again. I love this place. Thanks for being here for me’. It is highly regarded for the feeling of safety it brings: ‘This place feels like a moment of rest and a place of safe haven.’ This sense of safety is social and psychological, as geographically Binsey is quite isolated – if danger threatened, there is no one around to come to the rescue.

The theological concept of the human race as pilgrims in this world comes together with Bauman’s analysis of society falling into the four categories of traveller – tourist, vagabond, stroller and player¹⁶³ with entries that highlight rootlessness ‘a place for the wandering soul to remember its home’. It is not made clear whether this ‘home’ is earthly or spiritual, a vagueness that is echoed in ‘saintly light that slants upon the flagstones. None of us here alone’, the reference to the saints at the beginning of the sentence perhaps implying that the community referred to is not of this world.

Some comments do mention home and community, linking what is found at Binsey with memories of earlier times, perhaps of greater security and stability: ‘It smells like my grandmother’s house at the end of the winter, when its been locked for months....and I love this. And love this place.’ ‘I love the smell of this place it reminds me of a garage I played in as a child.’ Binsey is even used as a substitute for the source of comfort and help that is looked for at home: ‘couldn’t get home so came here. A wonderful substitute’.

6.2 Rituals of Departure

One of the most famous accounts of a medieval pilgrimage is that of the Norfolk woman who dictated her spiritual autobiography some time in the 1430s. ‘The Book of Margery Kempe’ is one of the earliest autobiographies and contains much interesting detail about

¹⁶³ Tidball 2004, 188

the two lengthy pilgrimages she made to Jerusalem and later to Santiago de Compostela, as well as several within England. She began her preparations for departure to Jerusalem in the spring of 1413, for a journey in the autumn. Firstly she travelled to Lincoln and then Canterbury to seek spiritual guidance and also permission to leave her husband and undertake the journey. All pilgrims had first to obtain not only the blessing of the Church on their journey, but a letter of commendation from their overlord, giving permission to undertake the journey. This entitled the pilgrim to the privileges of the position – free food, drink and lodgings and immunity from ‘all civil claims of law.’¹⁶⁴ By 1388 it was an arrestable offence for a pilgrim to travel without this document of ‘testimoniales’. Erstwhile pilgrims also had to make a will, and discharge any debts they might have before setting off. This last was an entirely practical arrangement, based on the fact that the lengthy pilgrimages, particularly those to the Holy Land, were extremely dangerous, and the pilgrim stood a good chance of not returning at all.

Margery Kempe also bought a pilgrimage outfit ‘a long grey robe with a hood, a broad brimmed hat marked with a red cross a small satchel for carrying special items, a water bottle and a long staff to assist with rough terrain.’¹⁶⁵ These were part of the equipment for all pilgrims. The satchel or scrip would contain the all-important letter of safe conduct, some food and water but little else. The staff was a vital piece of equipment; used not only to support injury but fight off wild animals and ruffians. It was essential to travel as lightly as possible, thus emulating as far as possible the earliest apostles who first travelled in Christ’s name: ‘do not take along any gold or silver or copper in your belts; take no bag for the journey, or extra tunic or sandals or a staff’.¹⁶⁶ A pilgrim’s equipment was unique and special, and became very dear to those who wore them – the body of a medieval pilgrim buried in the nave of Worcester Cathedral had been buried with his boots, staff and bag, as well as scallop shells, symbols of the pilgrimage to Santiago.¹⁶⁷

Once the pilgrim had his testimonial and his clothing, he could seek the blessing of the Church. After confessing his sins, a special mass might be said in his parish church, commending the pilgrim and the journey to God. Each item of clothing was blessed before the pilgrim put it on and set off. There exists in the Sarum Missal a section of prayers and

¹⁶⁴ Sumption 1975, 44

¹⁶⁵ Staley 2001, 32

¹⁶⁶ Matthew 10:9.10

¹⁶⁷ Lack 2003, 1

blessings for pilgrims about to travel, with special blessings for bag and staff: 'Often he would be escorted to the boundary of his parish or town by members of the village or tradesman's guild, sometimes with the additional benefit of a collection made for him by his friends or fellow workers.'¹⁶⁸

The contemporary pilgrim does not have to undergo such a complicated leaving ritual, although perhaps the procedure of asking for an extended period of leave or sabbatical from work for the purpose of pilgrimage does bear similarities to gaining permission from one's overlord. Similarly, the agreement of family members might also need to be sought, particularly for lengthy and indeed costly trips. While the medieval pilgrim could count on hostels, monasteries and other places of refuge to supply immediate physical needs, particularly on well used routes such as the Camino Frances to Santiago de Compostela, today's pilgrim is not so fortunate. Some months may have to be spent in saving up adequate funds to allow for even the most rudimentary board and lodging.

Similarly, although today's pilgrim is not distinguished by his cloak and scrip, the chances are he will be wearing clothes specially designed for walking, that do indeed set him apart from the rest of the population, particularly when the pilgrim route goes through a large urban area. The well-dressed commuters of Oxford city, walking along the Thames path to the station to catch the London train are easily distinguished in their suits and highly polished shoes from those wearing baggy shorts and sturdy boots, heading for the same destination but by a different mode of transport. However, these clothes are not unique to the pilgrim – the only possible identifier is the wearing of a scallop shell around the neck or on the backpack. Once souvenirs of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela (see later), these shells now serve not as proofs of journey accomplished but as signs of intention, and are most often donned at the beginning of the journey rather than at its end.

This said, however, these rituals of departure are private, rather than public declarations. Unlike the medieval pilgrim, for the most part demonstration of intent to go on pilgrimage today is a personal domestic affair, rather than one involving the community or even the church. Some efforts have been made to change this – the accompanying booklet to the newly opened Thames Pilgrim Way contains within it a brief liturgy for beginning each stage of the journey, including a prayer taken from the Sarum Missal : 'The Almighty and everlasting God, Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, dispose your journey according to

¹⁶⁸ Welch 2009, 28

His good pleasure; send his angel Raphael to keep you in this your pilgrimage, and both conduct you in peace on your way to the place where you would be, and bring you back again on your return to us in safety.¹⁶⁹ Similarly, the Oxford Diocesan Living Faith initiative uses the pilgrim theme in its corporate prayer: 'Pilgrim God, You are our origin and our destination. Travel with us, we pray, in every pilgrimage of faith, and every journey of the heart. Give us the courage to set off, the nourishment we need to travel well, and the welcome we long for at our journey's end. So may we grow in grace and love of you and in the service of others. through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.'¹⁷⁰

There is no evidence to be gained from the visitors' books of any rituals of departure used by those writing in the book at Binsey, although the very act of writing in the book can certainly be looked upon as a ritual of arriving. However, it is known that some groups of pilgrims who set out deliberately to walk to Binsey will have ritualised their departure with prayers or even a full church service – part of the planned Oxford Diocesan Festival in 2014 includes a pilgrimage to Binsey complete with leaving service. Further indirect evidence can also be found in the piles of stones that are left by the door of the church at Binsey, or at the entrance to the well – it is impossible to tell whether these were gathered in sight of Binsey or at the moment of departure, but personal experience affirms that some stones at least are brought from a pilgrim's home to be deposited at Binsey.

6.3 Reasons for leaving

From the earliest times, people have made pilgrimages, defined by Hopper ¹⁷¹as 'journeys undertaken to a sacred site in a devotional spirit'. Evidence of aboriginal sacred journeys is around from prehistoric times and the pagan shrine of Apollo at Delphi was visited by the Ancient Greeks ¹⁷²For the Jewish people, life as a sacred journey was a recurring theme: 'the word GO is seared into the very flesh of Israel' ¹⁷³and the impetus for pilgrimage was carried over into Christian civilisation. Eager to 'see and touch places where Christ was physically present' ¹⁷⁴there is evidence from the 4th century of pilgrimages to Jerusalem. St Helena journeyed to Jerusalem in 326 and gathered lots of relics which she brought back with her and from 385 we have the first pilgrim's guide book 'peregrinatio egeria'. By the

¹⁶⁹ Welch 2014, forthcoming

¹⁷⁰ Welch 2014 forthcoming

¹⁷¹ Hopper 2002, 3

¹⁷² Platten, 1996, 5

¹⁷³ Giles 1996, 18

¹⁷⁴ Sumption 1975, 89

beginning of the Middle Ages, pilgrimage was a fundamental part of European Christian life.

Reasons for pilgrimage were many, and although not all pilgrims undertook the difficult and dangerous journey that was a pilgrimage for all the reasons, behind every such excursion lay at least one reason. The 'banality and suffering'¹⁷⁵ of the Middle Ages was such that it proved a powerful reason for undertaking a pilgrimage. As Sumption writes: 'the desire to witness or experience a miracle was the principle motive for many pilgrimages'¹⁷⁶ and often the desire was for a miracle of healing. Ill health was prevalent at that time, doctors few and poorly equipped, diet bad, sanitary conditions worse – to such an extent that 'a complete sense of physical well-being was probably rare.'¹⁷⁷ As Sumption points out, often the miracle of healing was nothing more than a change of diet, but perceived as miracles, tales of such cures became powerful motivators of pilgrimage.

Often, however, the sickness was not physical but mental, engendered by a deep sense of sin, and penitential pilgrimages were common. 'Obsession with remission of sins can be observed in all the more notable pilgrims of the period' notes Sumption¹⁷⁸ and by the 11th century this concept had become formalised into the notion that an automatic remission of sins was obtained by a formal visit to a particular shrine – there was even a ranking system whereby the more serious the sin, the further away the shrine, with Jerusalem reserved for the most notable crimes. Henry II famously undertook a pilgrimage after the murder of Thomas a Becket by his knights. This soon became even more formalised by the 12th and 13th century and enforced pilgrimage was 'the all- purpose penalty for violent crimes.'¹⁷⁹

Providing a contrast to this purpose was the desire to escape from the evils of society: 'to renounce civilisation as contemporaries know it was a powerful spiritual impulse'.¹⁸⁰ The ascetic desire to rid oneself of the burdens of society and journey unencumbered to seek spiritual solace was powerful one: 'a journey into holiness and truth, it was also a journey of self-discovery'¹⁸¹. However, there were theological issues with this concept: 'there was a real sense in which the popularity of place oriented pilgrimage and devotion to the saints

¹⁷⁵ Sumption 1975, 77

¹⁷⁶ Sumption 1975, 77

¹⁷⁷ Sumption 1975, 75

¹⁷⁸ Sumption 1975, 101

¹⁷⁹ Sumption 1975, 105

¹⁸⁰ Hopper 2002, 159

¹⁸¹ Ferrer Blehl 2001, xi

threatened to diminish the true scale of the Christian life... both trends may have expressed genuine devotion but they also facilitated a kind of spiritual reductionism as the demands of a direct relationship with God and the requirement to make the whole of life a pilgrimage were gradually scaled down to something a little more manageable.¹⁸²

This reason was, however, a less common motivation than that of mere interest and curiosity. 'Pilgrimage provided the endorsed pretext needed for withdrawal from the domestic and repetitive nature of the monthly schedule to be immersed in new surrounding and experiences'¹⁸³. Medieval life was very restricted and quite repetitive. The opportunity to travel was severely limited, and any chances, however risky, often enthusiastically seized upon. As the pilgrimage routes became better defined and the infra-structure of guest houses more sophisticated the appeal of pilgrimage grew: 'it would be a gross exaggeration to suggest that simple curiosity had displaced the intensely spiritual feeling of an early age, but in the early 15th century it was certainly the predominant motive for many pilgrims.'¹⁸⁴

This desire to seek adventure has remained as a primary motivator for pilgrimage to this day. Many studies have been undertaken on the reasons people decide to embark on what can be a difficult, arduous, lonely and time consuming trip, depending on the mode of transport chosen. Although the Catholic Church, official 'keepers' of the Camino, would prefer people to make the journey from religious reasons, there are many different reasons that compel people to make the difficult and challenging journey. Although triggered by an event, pilgrimage itself is a process, argues Frey¹⁸⁵ and the motives of pilgrims often change and develop over time. Indeed, once on the route itself, the travellers find themselves becoming pilgrims, both through their own expectations and through the culture around them – their identity is 'socially conferred as well as personally created.'¹⁸⁶ This in turn has an effect on how they see their journey and their own expectations of it. However, some broad areas do emerge.

Occasionally the modern pilgrim will undertake a journey out of penance – 2012 was a Holy Year for the trail to Santiago de Compostela. Anyone who undertook this journey in that

¹⁸² Dyas 2004, 101

¹⁸³ Hopper 2002, 159

¹⁸⁴ Sumption 1975, 257

¹⁸⁵ Frey 1998, 232

¹⁸⁶ Frey 1998, 25

year would have obtained double the amount of time remitted from purgatory. Frey cites a more structured approach to the penitential nature of pilgrimage; the modern penitential pilgrimage still exists as part of the Dutch and Belgian juvenile penal systems. 'Since 1982, in conjunction with the Belgian Ministry of Justice, a non profit-making group called Oikoten has used the Camino de Santiago as a path of rehabilitation for young social reprobates. In an attempt to reintegrate these young people into society Oikoten sends one to two young people with one or more monitors on a four month version of the pilgrimage for reflection and repentance.'¹⁸⁷

Often the pains experienced on the journey turn into an opportunity for spiritual penitence and humility. Frey cites a healthy man who had assumed he would have no problems with the journey. A foot full of blisters proved an object lesson in humility and an opportunity to accept the help of others.

More often than seeking absolution, the modern pilgrim seeks healing; many thousands of pilgrims flock to Lourdes each year, and the Bureau des Constatations, which records occurrences of healing, states that in the first fifty years of the shrine's existence, over 4,000 miracles occurred.

The journey of a pilgrim can offer the chance to re-evaluate one's life. Living on the threshold of normal life brings a new perspective to it. Davies¹⁸⁸ cites the pilgrimage as a useful spiritual exercise, reminding one of the nature of our journey on this earth and our short stay here. Hume¹⁸⁹ uses it as a way of making sense of our life journey. The time and space offered on a physical journey can help an understanding of the corresponding spiritual progress. Heath¹⁹⁰ writes of the way that a pilgrimage puts us in touch with the communion of saints; with all who have travelled that way before and will travel it afterwards. Davies¹⁹¹ explores the importance of suffering on a pilgrimage as a way of entering more fully into a relationship and understanding of Christ: 'It was not just the acquisition of knowledge or experience or even new ideas. One had to grant that suffering must be part of the journey too, if it helped us to grow close to him who suffered much'.

¹⁸⁷ Frey 1998, 162

¹⁸⁸ Davies 1998, 76

¹⁸⁹ Hume 1984, 37

¹⁹⁰ Heath 1911

¹⁹¹ Davies 1998, 52

Just as in medieval times, many people seek healing through pilgrimage. This can be a straightforward search for physical healing, such as impels many of the pilgrims who travel to Lourdes each year. However, more complicated spiritual and psychological healing can also be sought, and often found, in the process of journeying and arrival. People travel to celebrate relationships; couples may journey to a site on their anniversary, or to test the strength of a new relationship under difficult circumstances. A desire to escape everyday life, with its restrictions and limitations, can be very powerful, and with this desire, a sense of seeking time and space in which to find meaning and personal transformation. Those whose lives appear to have reached a dead end, or whose life circumstances have taken an unexpected turn, travel to find space, to find a resolution of the past and resolve for the future.

Pilgrimage can be undertaken in fulfilment of a promise, as a way of prayer, as a journey to spiritual wholeness. It can be a cultural excursion, the wonderful sites along the way given an extra dimension by the awareness that hundreds of thousands of people have travelled this way before, through the centuries. To become part of such a community, stretching back through time and across the globe, can itself be a powerful experience.

For the pilgrim to a small, local site, such as Binsey, the reasons for travelling do not have to be as significant as those investing much effort and many days in the journey. The psychological and physical impact of a short walk to Binsey is greatly reduced when compared to treks lasting many days or even weeks. There are ways in which the experience can be enhanced, however. For those who cannot undertake a full pilgrimage, modern writers offer the opportunity to undertake a shortened one. Till ¹⁹² gives a pilgrim's guide to the Cathedral of Winchester. Housing one of the most popular shrines in England, that of St Swithun, Winchester Cathedral becomes not just a starting place for travellers on The Pilgrim's Way to Canterbury but a destination in itself. In one day or less, the reader can undertake a spiritual journey that corresponds to the physical one. The Oxford Diocesan Pilgrimage initiative also explores ways in which pilgrim journeys can be made around local areas, the church building, or even simply around one's home: 'the answer for me has been that our God is not only the God of the wide open spaces and the long winding road, but a God who can be found even in the smallest detail, in the most ordinary actions of our everyday life....Great insights might emerge on long journeys, but

¹⁹² Till 1997 passim

they can come too from undertaking shorter journeys with open hearts and minds....the results can be just as powerful, the insights just as significant, as those gained on a more arduous journey through an unfamiliar landscape.'¹⁹³ Certainly the comments made by Binsey pilgrims reflect this: 'absolutely beautiful, a truly inspirational pilgrimage'.

There are those who seek healing from the well or the church: 'Half way through my treatment. Anxiously awaiting results. Please pray for a successful outcome. This place is my refuge. Praise God'. There are also others who have specifically journeyed to Binsey to give thanks for healing that has already occurred: 'Returning to the well and little church that brought me healing in the 1960s I give thanks and continue to pray for healing for my family and friends'. 'It is a wonderful place to heal wounds, help ones grief to emerge, calm oneself.' St Margaret of Antioch was often called upon in the Middle Ages and even later to help those who were childless, and it is known that Henry VIII paid a visit to Binsey and prayed at the well, presumably to invoke aid for such a problem. Most moving are the entries that indicate a modern day supplication – and a joyful resolution: 'After 12 years of waiting and many visits to this wonderful sanctuary we have been blessed. Our first child Rosa Finnen was born on Tuesday 24.6.08'.

Success is also sought, particularly by students: 'For the last two years I have prayed in here that I would not fail out of my MPhil - and sure enough, I passed!!' 'Finals this time'. Binsey is visited by students before, during and after their exams, and sometimes many years after that, as a way of remembering and commemorating a time spent studying at Oxford 'I visited the church six years ago (July 2001). At that time I started my PhD studying life.'

These journeys are not dissimilar from those making other trips in memory of past events – anniversaries of birth, death and marriage are all celebrated by a trip to Binsey: 'I was born at The Limes Binsey in 1919 and christened in this church! ' 'We were married here over 13 years ago - lovely to come back with our children' 'RIP Patricia Moss'. Binsey is seen as the holder of memory and as such it appears that the event can only properly be commemorated or celebrated by a return visit to the actual spot that the event occurred. This in turn builds further significance into the place, so that the place becomes the holder of significance, another layer of memory, valid in itself.

¹⁹³ Welch 2012, 7

6.4 Destination

The difference between space and place has been discussed already in this research, and discovered to be a nuanced and subtle concept. For the practical purposes of pilgrimage, however, every journey had to have a destination, and this choice of destination was most often made according to the perceived needs of the pilgrim or to local tradition and custom. Fundamental to the decision about where to head for was the belief that 'certain places and sites were favoured by God and therefore had a greater spiritual puissance'.¹⁹⁴

The most obvious of these places were of course those where Jesus had lived, stayed, preached and died: 'the most celebrated tomb visited by pilgrims in the Middle Ages was empty.'¹⁹⁵ However, other places too were held to be if not quite as significant as Jerusalem, at least of great importance. Of the three great pilgrimage destinations, Jerusalem of course was the greatest, but Rome with its connections with St Peter and Santiago home of the body of St James, miraculously washed ashore off the Spanish coast, came next, above many hundreds of second and third ranking sites. Lesser sites too were visited, as the pilgrim was perceived to be 'not merely going to a place, but going to a place to meet a person', from very early on, pilgrimages were made to the sites of Christian martyrs.

By travelling to places where saints had lived or performed miracles, it was felt that a closeness was gained to the saint which perhaps could put one in favour with them : 'Saints were individuals no less immediate, no less tangible in death than they had been in life. It was essential to this view of things that a saint should be considered to inhabit the place where his relics were preserved in that place he should above all be venerated'¹⁹⁶

It was also felt that places made holy by people for events brought one closer to eternity: 'physical contact with a shrine gives at least a fleeting moment of direct contact with Divine.'¹⁹⁷ The fundamental importance of the shrine was that it served as a bridge between this world and the next, between the reality of earth and the possibility of heaven: 'particular places and objects acted in effect as divine go-between in a quest for

¹⁹⁴ Hopper 2002, 5

¹⁹⁵ Sumption 1975, 89.

¹⁹⁶ Sumption 1975, 49

¹⁹⁷ Barnes, Branfoot 2006 p13

personal salvation.¹⁹⁸ 'The saints are with God; the saints continue to be with us; ergo they are mediators in our midst of the presence of divine power – a kind of taster of what was on offer in the other world.'¹⁹⁹

Interestingly, in some cases it was the virtue of the holy person and divine power acting through human agency that mattered more than the place itself. 'Bodies of saints were moved, stolen and even broken up in attempts to benefit from their virtue.'²⁰⁰

It is important to remember that not all pilgrimages had to be of great length – there is evidence that short, local journeys were made to small, local shrines if the matter was not considered to be serious enough to merit a long journey. Although a desire for healing from a major illness, or a vow made after recovery from the same might initiate a lengthy journey, a minor illness might be considered only to need a short journey to the shrine of a lesser saint, especially one that had a particular connection with the sufferer's affliction. Thus shrines dedicated to St Margaret of Antioch might be visited by those wishing to avoid pain in childbirth, or the holy well of St Frideswide by people seeking healing from eye complaints. There are many similar records to that of the vow made by a French cowherd swearing to visit St Martial at Limoges if he protected his cows from English bandits.²⁰¹

The destination of the modern pilgrim has declined in importance compared to medieval times. Now the journey is the key to growth and insight, the shrine is often merely a way of signifying the end of that journey. 'Pilgrims walk to change themselves, they walk to find meaning: 'we were all walking to make a difference to the quality of our spiritual lives'²⁰² and thus the journey has gained an even greater significance than the arrival at a site. Previously held to be the place where meaning was found, a shrine 'permeated with the highly charged spiritual energy of a saint'²⁰³ is often now merely the indicator of the end of the journey – it is the journey itself that is the transformative experience. Pilgrimage is about 'encouraging those who initially may be attracted by the lure of the holy place and the romantic destination to think about their own lives and their inner journey.'²⁰⁴

¹⁹⁸ Mullins 2001, 91

¹⁹⁹ Sheldrake 2001, 48

²⁰⁰ Sheldrake 2001, 50

²⁰¹ Sumption 1975, 140

²⁰² Friend 2006 p124

²⁰³ Hopper 2002, 123

²⁰⁴ Bradley 2001, 216

Some of the entries at Binsey reflect the unimportance of destination in a very dramatic way, in that they express surprise at having arrived at the place at all: 'We just happened upon this beautiful church - what a lovely surprise and a wonderful place'. So unimportant was the destination that it was not even considered: 'I can't believe we were so fortunate to stumble upon this church. Thank you'. 'Discovered by accident while cycling, entranced by stillness and peace. This is how churches should be.' However, even these visitors find some element of the supernatural about the destination – to find such a place at the end of a journey must make both the journey and the place more significant: 'The path less travelled. From the flip of a coin'.

However, the lessening of significance of the destination for major journeys has not necessarily meant a corresponding decline in the importance of smaller sacred places. Indeed, 'our age has created new associations of place and locality, as witness the current fashion for shrines at the site of tragic deaths on our roads.'²⁰⁵ There is a much smaller body of research on the subject of the lesser shrines, although research on places like St Melangell gives some indication of reasons for travelling there; it seems to be that 'local instincts are at work as strongly as ever; but our intellectual traditions have not enabled us either to articulate them or to understand them.'²⁰⁶

Certainly Binsey's records indicate that a significant proportion of visitors have journeyed not only with Binsey in mind but with a specific intention for Binsey that it seems only Binsey can provide. Some entries in the visitors' books reflect the ordinary preoccupations with tourists: 'we came to see the carvings', for example. Others chose to visit Binsey because of its literary associations: 'A lovely walk from Oxford to find this beautiful church, to wish in the well and enjoy memories of the Mad Hatters Tea Party'. 'Recommended a visit by the late Sir John Betjeman. Just as he described it.'

Some of the entries report finding the place as 'magical' and there is an element of paganism or at least New Age spirituality: 'It's great that Pagans and Christians can share this sacred place, a holy well in both. May the blessings be all who drink from this cup.' 'There's a great spirit alive inside here'. This reflects the ancient nature of sacred space: 'temenos is an archetypal theme that has run through history since early man was first

²⁰⁵ North and North 2007, 11

²⁰⁶ O Donovan 1999, 45

inspired to worship at natural sites such as a spring, a stone, a great height or a tree.²⁰⁷

Certainly some of the entries echo this feeling of an ancient pre-Christian and post-Christian spirituality 'Felt the energy of the cross ley lines of Roseview connecting with the Philippines, my land of birth - to the cosmos.'

Others visit Binsey because of its associations with Ss Frideswide and Margaret, as a sort of 'paying respect' to the local saint, reflecting Keulemans and Burton's research into visitors to St Melangell's shrine: 'the associations of the locality with the saint, together with the holiness and aura attached to the saint's life, have created a sacred place, a particular geographical locus where the saint can be remembered and venerated and where the pilgrim may still find benefit today through the atmosphere and spiritual influences encountered in that place.'²⁰⁸ 'We visited this church to pay our respect to the patron of this city, St Frideswide.' 'Another visit to St Margaret - and St Margaret's Church'.

But there is more to it than that. Inge quotes Taylor's assertion that specific sites are made holy by events, which are then added to by the pilgrim's own experience: 'a pilgrim goes to a specific holy site to recall events that took place there and pray. The experience is much more emotional than intellectual and lays great store on the sites imbued aura of sanctity and importance'.²⁰⁹ In this way layers of experience are added to the holy site, both personalising it and sanctifying it for the rest of the community by virtue of the witness of the pilgrim to its holiness. 'Back again and again'. 'I came for a top up of strength. Thank you St Margaret's'.

Sometimes the visit is made with a specific reason in mind such as healing, but at other times it seems that the effect of the place is dependent on regular visits, as if to miss a visit would bring on disaster: 'For the last two years I have prayed in here that I would not fail out of my MPhil - and sure enough, I passed!! This church is very special - I'm sorry to be leaving it when I go back to America'. At other times prayers have been made before and after a significant event, and the visit is a tying up of loose ends: 'I am here again after four years, to give thanks for the completion of my thesis. I have dreamt of this little church all this time. Thank you'.

²⁰⁷ Du Boulay 1996, 1

²⁰⁸ Keulemans and Burton 2012, 189

²⁰⁹ (Taylor, JE 1993 311) in Inge 2001, 94

Although there are visitors who arrive at Binsey by accident, or with purely secular aims in mind, many more are drawn to the sacredness of the place, a sacredness given validity either by their own experience or by the witness of others: 'Someone described this church as the most numinous place in Oxford.' This witness is built up through the entries in the book, as each subsequent visitor adds their experience of the holy to the ones before, until the power of the place becomes almost animate: 'Hello again Binsey. I think I need your help again', and the visitor is drawn almost despite themselves to the place: 'Sometimes I just know I need to come here, just for the peace of this holy place'.

6.5 Fellow Pilgrims

The medieval pilgrim rarely travelled alone, although it was believed to be especially virtuous to do so. However, much virtue was of little avail if one was set upon by bandits, and a pilgrim generally travelled with at least two or three companions. Indeed, it became common for a nobleman or abbot to head up a significant size of party, consisting of retainers, servants and others who appreciated the safety of travelling in a large group. This brought advantages of companionship, the possibility of being the recipient of a rich pilgrims hospitality, and most importantly of all, safety. Although punishments for those attacking pilgrims were particularly severe, the solitary traveller was always at risk from brigands and thieves, particularly if he was not relying on charity for his journey and had brought a full purse with him. Stories of violence upon the road were common, and good enough reason to cherish companions if they were around. Webb mentions the 13th century church of Boughton Aluph, which in the 16th century had a large fireplace added onto the south porch. It is believed that this was for the use of pilgrims, who gathered in the church porch until there were sufficient numbers of them to walk through Kings Wood, a popular haunt of robbers.²¹⁰

However, the pilgrim was reminded also that danger could lie in the hands of his companions themselves, for there were regular reports of pilgrims being set upon by the very people who were journeying with him – the road from Saintes to the Pyrenees, on the

²¹⁰ Webb 2000, 189

way to Santiago was particularly notorious for being haunted by groups of professional thieves, who dressed as pilgrims in order to gain the confidence of their victims.²¹¹

Companions could be a nuisance in other ways also – the Book of Margery Kempe describes how she irritated her fellow pilgrims ‘because she wept so much and spoke always of the goodness of Our Lord, as much at table as other places.’²¹² Eventually she irritated them so much that they left her behind, and she was only allowed to travel with them if she sat at the other end of the table from them ‘where she was excluded from the conversation, and where if she started her sobbing and praying where would not disturb the secular cheerfulness of the other pilgrims.’²¹³

For it was this last that was the greatest benefit of travelling in a group – the pleasure of setting out with a group of people, an exciting adventure before one, with time for tales and laughter on the journey. Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* gives a fine picture of just such a journey, with a mixed group of characters all adding to the interest of the trip. For a while, all those features that defined and limited a medieval personality could be left behind – wealth, social status, spouses, past behaviour. An entirely new personality could be adopted for the journey, free from social restraint and able to enjoy the company of others who were equally let loose from their social categories.

To a large extent, this freedom continues today. Travelling companions are sometimes still sought for safety, particularly for women travelling alone or those who lack of knowledge of the local language gives them cause to fear they might not be understood in the case of an emergency. However, many more times people travel in a group for the added value that these short but intense ‘road relationships’ can bring to a pilgrimage. Those walking along the route may set off together but spread out along the road according to their travelling speed, or they might form a group once on the journey. Here too the regular means of choosing companions are superfluous – traditional ways of assessing people, by wealth, profession or class for example, are discarded and instead one’s walking speed, adaptability, friendliness and generosity become the measuring sticks. Friend²¹⁴ writes on the unspoken contract of pilgrims to ‘laugh, to smile to share, to encourage, to help and to

²¹¹ Sumption 1975, 197

²¹² Ure 2006, 66

²¹³ Ure, 2006, 66

²¹⁴ Friend 2006 p124

be open to everything that lies on the way'. Normal rules of engagement are suspended – a whole new society is formed: 'no one has any status on the Chemin other than that of pilgrim so we were all the same'.²¹⁵

Frey in her studies of contemporary pilgrims on the route to Santiago, writes of the society formed by pilgrims: 'Although the Catholic Church, official 'keepers' of the Camino, would prefer people to make the journey from religious reasons, there are many different reasons that compel people to make the difficult and challenging journey. Once on the route, however, the travellers find themselves becoming pilgrims, both through their own expectations and through the culture around them – their identity is 'socially conferred as well as personally created'.²¹⁶

The opportunities for the formation of deep relationships, and groups bonding together over their experiences are necessarily more limited if the pilgrimage is merely a day trip such as those commonly connected with Binsey. However, it is evident that almost as many pilgrims to Binsey arrive with one or more companions as journey alone. Large groups are uncommon but not rare – the author recently took a group of twenty pilgrims from St Giles Church in the city centre to St Frideswide's shrine in the Cathedral via Binsey. This mixed group all spoke of the unexpected pleasure they had gained from talking to people they had never really made contact with before, despite attending the same church. Hours spent on the road means that conversation can be very deep, carrying with it that lack of urgency that so much of today's tasks are burdened with.

Different speeds of the walkers enable one to change travelling companion without rudeness simply by dint of speeding up or slowing down; tedious conversations can be ended and new ones struck up without any social unease. Bradley writes of the benefits for people 'to make confession, formal or otherwise, and to get things off their chest while walking side by side with a companion/confessor rather than in a confrontational face to face encounter'.²¹⁷ Schools bring confirmation groups on pilgrimage to help them engage with a different type of prayer to the ones they are used to, as well as giving the students some feel for the history they are studying as part of the National Curriculum.

²¹⁵ Friend 2006 p123.

²¹⁶ Frey 1998, 25

²¹⁷ Bradley 2001, 19

These large groups do not make up the majority of visitors, however, particularly not those who write in the books. These seem to be equally divided between those who travel with friends and those who journey alone. Those who travel with companions sometimes travel as part of an anniversary party '25 years ago we were married in this church. What a happy day it was and what a happy quarter of a century!' or celebrating another occasion: 'Bob Morgan's stag crew'. 'I finished my exams. I came here again with my friend Gus'. Others bring friends because they wish to share the experience of Binsey with them: 'brought a friend to meet a friend'. Stories of some of these can be traced throughout the books: 'What a beautiful day! Today here in this church, Rebecca Clifford said she will marry me!' 'A year ago we got engaged, standing right here - what a wonderful place to have started our lives together.'

Many others visit Binsey deliberately alone: 'a rare privilege to be alone in God's house. Thank you'. The comments are appreciative of the stillness of the place 'entranced by stillness and peace', and value it enough to continue to visit it – the solitude of the journey enhancing the experience 'thanks for the solitude'. The isolation of the place does not bring fear but gratitude for a chance to be alone: 'so peaceful and set apart from a busy world', 'refreshingly peaceful; so good to have such a contrast with busy student life'. As Inge remarks on the nature of the church building 'the pilgrim, the traveller, the seeker, the refugee, the petitioner or the thanksgiver may quietly come, anonymously perhaps, without fear of comment or remark, question or disturbance'.²¹⁸ This is echoed in Littler Francis and Martineau's analysis of church visitors, in which the respondents 'placed importance on begin able to withdraw, albeit briefly from the world and find a place of peace and tranquillity'.²¹⁹

6.6 Vicarious pilgrimage

A pilgrim planning his journey in the 11th century might expect to pay a significant sum of money to complete the entire journey. Even if the food and lodging could be begged from hostels and charitable foundations along the route, English pilgrims planning a trip to a shrine anywhere on the Continent or further afield would have at least to find the money for the sea voyage. For those in the higher echelons of society this did not present a problem. For the poorer members of society, one approach could be to find a sponsor who would pay the pilgrim to undertake the journey. The benefits of this were not altogether

²¹⁸ Inge 2003, 112

²¹⁹ Littler, Francis and Martineau 2012, 184

one sided – not only would the sponsor avoid the difficulties and dangers of the trip itself, but the spiritual benefits such as time off purgatory or a particularly attentive saint, grateful for the effort made to reach their shrine, would also be shared between pilgrim and sponsor. This method of vicarious pilgrimage – paying someone else to go on pilgrimage for you – was very popular, particularly if in a moment of extreme fear or illness, a wealthy man had made a vow to undertake a pilgrimage if he was spared. On recovery, the practical dangers and difficulties of such a task might easily induce a man to pay someone else to undertake the journey. There is evidence that this was quite a popular activity – would be crusaders (a particularly militaristic type of pilgrimage) who were prevented by illness had always been allowed to send a substitute as Thierry, duke of Lorraine, did in 1096,²²⁰ and medieval wills contain many mentions of money being left for the purpose of pilgrimage: ‘it was far from uncommon for money to be left to carry out pilgrimages which he or she had promised and failed to perform.’²²¹ In 1403, for example, a knight’s will included the request that: ‘some man should be hired for the pilgrimage to Jerusalem for his soul and the forgiveness of his crimes if he himself shall be unable to perform that pilgrimage during his life.’²²²

The concept of undertaking a vicarious pilgrimage today has largely fallen out of fashion. With the emphasis on the benefit of the pilgrimage shifting from the destination to the journey, the significance of pilgrimage has become more weighted towards the experiential – it is something that has to be undergone personally in order for it to have any transformational effect. However, the idea of paying someone else to undertake the journey with a vague notion that some of the benefit of the journey will accrue to the donor lingers on in the notion of sponsored pilgrimages, where an individual undertakes a journey on behalf of a specific charity, usually one with which the pilgrim has a strong personal connection. Members of the individual’s social groups, such as work, church and family, all give money towards this charity on condition of a successful completion of the journey.

Perhaps this gift of money is no more than a gesture of support; perhaps it will weigh in their favour at some later time of judgement. In addition to this formal sponsorship arrangement, many pilgrims undertake a journey on behalf of a friend or relative, usually

²²⁰ Sumption 1975, 139

²²¹ Webb 2000, 196

²²² Webb 2000, 197

deceased. The 2010 film 'The Way' is based on a father taking his son's ashes on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela in fulfilment of an intention the son had made to undertake the journey.

For most visitors, the trip to Binsey is not considered lengthy enough or sufficiently taxing to merit either sponsorship or to perform it on behalf of a loved one. However, there is evidence that the visit has been made as a result of an informal vow. This is particularly clear in the area of students at University or college. It seems that many students visited Binsey at the beginning of their studies, and promised themselves they would return at the end: 'I visited the church six years ago (July 2001). At that time I started my PhD studying life. This year, I visit here again and I have earned my degree with honour. After this UK trip I will begin my clinical work. I enjoy Oxford's everything.' This action could be compared to a traditional 'quest' activity, in reverse. In traditional quest literature of medieval literature, ordinary life is suspended until the hero's task (killing a dragon, rescuing a maiden, restoring a kingdom) is completed. Only when the task is completed, often after many years have passed and much distance has been travelled can the hero return and reclaim his life. In Binsey's situation, it appears that the quest, the activity that demands heroic acts of strength and determination, takes place within one part of the student's life – the journey and the shrine are the elements that are reclaimed at the end of many years and much expenditure of effort: 'I am here again after four years, to give thanks for the completion of my thesis. I have dreamt of this little church all this time. Thank you'. It is almost as if Binsey holds the key to the success of the student. 'I finished my exams on Saturday. I thank God for his calming love. A new graduate'.

The time of studying could be seen as a liminal time, a period when the progress of ordinary life is suspended until the studying is complete. The trips to Binsey mark the beginning and end of this time and the consequent re absorption into 'real life'. 'This is my last night in Oxford. I've lived studied, learned and worshipped here for three years. Its late evening, the light is heavy and golden, the wind is rushing through the trees - a perfect mid-summer evening. I love this church. It feels numinous. Thank you for sharing it with me as I say goodbye.'

6.7 Approach to the Site

After many days of travelling, sometimes even weeks, the pilgrim would finally arrive at his destination. Often there would have been indications that his journey's end was approaching; many of the pilgrim churches were built in the centre of ancient settlements which had been established in the days when a clear view of one's surrounding landscape was a vital part of survival. These churches would thus be built on higher ground, and their spires and towers would be visible for miles around. Sometimes this first glimpse of the final destination would itself become part of the pilgrimage ritual: 'Just before Compostela at the village of San Marco pilgrims would climb the hill of Monte del Gozo to catch their first glimpse of the cathedral and to add a stone to the cairn there, thus earning a hundred days off their stint in purgatory'.²²³ An additional vigour and energy would be gained from these first sightings and the pilgrim would hurry on towards his goal. The pilgrim route would deposit him in the square in front of the church or cathedral, and he would gaze in awe at the magnificent building in front of him, such a striking contrast with its combination of majestic size and fine stone carvings. Or at least he would gaze in awe if he could find a place in which he could do so without being pushed or shoved by the many people who filled the space with a hive of activity.

Sumption writes that the pilgrim would have been 'greeted at his destination by a scene of raucous tumult'.²²⁴ Particularly on a feast day, when a visit to a shrine was particularly efficacious, crowds of pilgrims would gather. The 15c writer Felix Fabri complained about the 'wailing, sobbing and convulsive fits'²²⁵ of his fellow pilgrims who had gathered with him just outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. And it would not only be pilgrims in the crowd. For wherever pilgrims were gathered, so too would be people who earned their living from pilgrims. 'On the feast day of the patron saint a noisy crowd gathered in front of the church. Pilgrims mingled with jugglers and conjurers souvenir sellers and pickpockets'.²²⁶ There would be the sighs and groans of the sick waiting to approach the shrine, the cries of the stallholders extolling their pilgrim guides, badges and candles for offering at the shrine, as well as the noisy relief of the pilgrims as they celebrated the end to their arduous journey. That this was not an appropriate way to end a spiritual journey was commented on down the centuries, from the fourth century when

²²³ Harpur 2002, 84

²²⁴ Sumption 1975, 211

²²⁵ Harpur 2002, 84

²²⁶ Sumption 1975, 211

‘Augustine of Hippo spoke of licentious revels, to the fifteenth, when the French preacher Oliver Maillard demanded an end to these sinful carnivals’.²²⁷

The contemporary pilgrim too often faces a similarly ‘raucous’ scene on his arrival at the main pilgrim sites of today. The magnificent view of Trondheim Cathedral from the top of a hill some five miles from the ancient city of ‘Nidaros’ is quickly lost as the pilgrim is plunged into the grey suburbs that spread outwards from the city centre. To arrive at St Peter’s Square, Rome, is to be engulfed by tourists, crowds and itinerant sellers of souvenirs and ice creams: ‘I did not see one person in Rome with a pilgrim staff or badge’.²²⁸

The square outside the Cathedral of St James in Santiago de Compostela is more restrained, as it is kept clear of market traders, but this is only to allow more space for the hundreds of pilgrims who arrive, singly or in groups, and celebrate the end of their journey with tears, shouts of joy, dancing or simply lying down on the cobbles in front of the Cathedral, while the building itself soars serenely above their heads : It is difficult to capture in words the sheer size and exuberance of its massive eighteenth century baroque façade built on to the original Romanesque frontage and the carnival atmosphere that pervades the huge square around the cathedral’.²²⁹

Nothing could be more strongly contrasted with the approach to Binsey. The small village, totalling some dozen houses and a tavern, is at the end of a mile and half of single lane track, discreetly signed from the Botley Road, the ‘dead end’ sign considerably larger than the ‘Binsey’ one. There is no indication on the track that leads from the Thames Path that the way leads to a village at all, and the houses themselves are only just visible from the path, particularly in the summer. A separate and distinct way from the Thames leads to the Perch Tavern, and once there access to the rest of the village is only obtained by walking directly through the tavern itself. In the centre of the village, a signpost indicates the Perch in one direction, and the church in another. A further half mile must be travelled along a narrow track between high hedges which in summer almost meet in the middle, so thick is their greenery.²³⁰ The last two hundred yards of the track, from which the church is still not visible, are lined with young sycamore trees that do not obstruct the views across

²²⁷ Sumption 1975, 211

²²⁸ Bradley 2001, 89

²²⁹ Bradley 2001, 107

²³⁰ Appendix 3

fields filled with sheep to the trees beyond. Finally, the track reaches a square manor house and a small pen of goats just to its left. A small note pinned on a wooden gate next to the goats indicates that the narrow footpath leads to Binsey Church, where all tracks and paths cease.²³¹

This abrupt plunge into what seems to be deepest countryside, only a few miles from the centre of a large and busy city, has a striking effect on the writers of the visitors' book. Indeed the approach to the church is for many an integral part of the Binsey experience: 'Once again this magical place has done its thing...Hope rises as I see the little goat kids frolicking, and the sheep in the field about to lamb' 'We loved the lovely walk to the church with the sheep bleating and the trees of the fields clapping their hands to the Lord Jesus', 'thank you for the heavenly goats'.²³² Connections are made between nature and the numinous, with a deep appreciation of both – the similarity between 'heavenly goats' and the 'heavenly hosts' of angels so popular in carols appears to be a subconscious use of 'spiritual' terminology when describing something that has a profoundly moving effect.

Many comment on the contrast between the noise of the city and the quiet of the church: 'Fantastic to find this peaceful place in the middle of everything rushing around', 'entranced by stillness and peace' 'in a sea of chaos and noise, a haven of quiet tranquillity'. Most entries that commented found this peace and tranquillity one of the significant factors in this appeal of the church – one however, appeared to be threatened by the very quietness that others found so attractive: 'to me, Susanne Leid, this secret place sings calmness too, but to my friend Andy Wester, it doesn't. He's just scared. Pray for him'. This reaction is echoed in the research undertaken at St Melangells shrine in Wales by Keulemans and Burton who state that the shrine's 'sense of holiness is undoubtedly enhanced by its remoteness and inaccessibility.'²³³

'This is how churches should be' is a sentiment that is expressed indirectly by many entries – a feeling that peace and quiet, somewhere to reflect in stillness is part of the purpose of a church. The approach to Binsey forms part of the experience of calm and restfulness, and combines for many the beauty of nature and the creator of that beauty. 'Looking for beauty' 'Walking on a beautiful afternoon - decided to stop to thank God for his bounteous

²³¹ Appendix 8

²³² Appendix 5

²³³ Keulemans and Burton 2012, 189

beauty. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to do so'. In their conclusion, Keulemans and Burton argue for the continued existence of small churches in rural settings near to large urban conurbations. They can be valuable resources for the spiritual nourishment of those wearied by city life: 'The research carried out for this study at Pennant Melangell demonstrates that there is also an alternative and equally worthwhile future for the tiny disused church building lost in the hills or hidden in the marshes.'²³⁴

6.8 Nature

Despite the comparative richness of the material that can be found on medieval pilgrim routes, written by those who had made the journey themselves, little seems to have been written on the countryside as a feature in its own right, or the beauty of the landscape that the route might lead the pilgrim through. Perhaps this was because the medieval relationship with nature was still one of symbiotic dependence – with most of the population relying on the land as a way of making a living, nature became a force out of which a sufficient supply of food had to be extracted so as to avoid starvation during the cruelties of nature. However, the 13c philosopher Duns Scotus provided a different, more holistic way of viewing man's position within creation. Scotus suggested that rather than objects in nature being a symbol of God, an expression of the creator 'all things in their very particularity participate directly in the life of the creator. Each thing was a uniquely important expression of Gods beauty as a whole.'²³⁵ Followers of Scotus argued that each particular element of creation came from the same source, and it was only through close attention to the particular that knowledge of the universal could be arrived at. 'Created particularity is revelation. What is individual is perfect in uniqueness. Thisness or 'haecceitas' is utterly specific.'²³⁶

'By implication all things exist not only to be themselves and to do themselves. Also in this being and doing all things do Christ. Thus each individual or particular thing is more than simply a symbol of something more. That would make it dispensable, usable and disposable.'²³⁷ In this he took his inspiration from Francis and his vision of the wholeness, the interdependence, the interconnectedness of all created things.

²³⁴ Keulemans and Burton 2012, 197

²³⁵ Sheldrake 2000, 24

²³⁶ Sheldrake 2000, 24

²³⁷ Sheldrake 2000, 14

Francis lived at a time when humankind's relationship with nature was changing. Patterns of land use were changing rapidly due to a rise in the population and its subsequent need for more resources in terms of food and fuel. The invention of the horse drawn plough meant that farming methods had become more efficient. Forests were cleared and more land had been put under the plough. The approach to animals had changed as well – no longer were they indicators of space and wildness but were becoming instead economic integers. In his relationship with nature and his deep passion for God's power and love manifested in creation, Francis broke through this pattern of utilitarianism and demonstrated another way of living in harmony with all that God had made.

However, although the relationship of the medieval citizen to nature might well have been one of appreciation for its beauty and the way in which it expresses the love of God for all creation in each individual part of creation itself, for the pilgrim, nature would often have made its presence felt in a much more practical form. 'To leave home was to enter an alien world full of hidden dangers, some real (like footpads and wolves) and some imagined (like demons and dragons).'²³⁸ The decision to make a pilgrimage was a brave one – access to pilgrim guides could turn it into a foolhardy one.

Setting aside all the disasters caused by human beings, such as theft or illness, the landscape through which the pilgrim made his way could be even more threatening - the 12c Guide for Pilgrims to Santiago takes great delight in detailing all the disasters which could befall the unlucky traveller: 'In Galicia there are thick forests and few towns; mosquitoes infest the marshy plain south of Bordeaux where the traveller who strays from the road can sink up to his knees in mud.'²³⁹ Even these itineraries, however, mostly only stuck to the practical advice that a pilgrim would need – parts of the country that were difficult to negotiate, places where route finding was challenging or where there were particular hazards such as steep hills and thick woods. Those few who did have access to itineraries would still not have been provided with all the information they needed, for such itineraries could not 'convey an adequate impression of the maze of side roads and by ways which pilgrims everywhere undoubtedly used opportunistically according to their individual places of origin and incidental purposes.'²⁴⁰

²³⁸ Ure 2006, 10

²³⁹ Sumption 1975, 177

²⁴⁰ Webb 2000, 127

Layered above the physical landscape of pilgrimage, lies the metaphorical one, to which the medieval mind would have been accustomed. The *Ancrene Riwe*, a 13c manual of instructions for those contemplating the life of an anchoress, makes much of the metaphor of life as a pilgrimage. This concept was given weight by Biblical images of travel – the Exodus of the Old Testament and the journeys of Christ and his apostles in the new. The Christian was ‘exhorted to realise that great truth that life itself was, inescapably, the real pilgrimage. The task was to apply the determination and single-mindedness to this pilgrimage that worldly pilgrims all too rarely applied to their journeys.’²⁴¹

Dante at the end of ‘Paradiso’ uses the figure of the pilgrim ‘trudging along the road and thinking that every house he sees must be the hostel as an analogy for the constant human state of unfulfilled longing for a moral or spiritual goal.’²⁴²

Even for pilgrims themselves, the landscape was not so much appreciated for itself but as the medium through which experience is generated. The travels of Margery Kemp follow the tradition of those whose pilgrimage ‘though real enough are in a sense visionary experience announced by visions, interpreted through visions and productive of visions.’²⁴³

For many contemporary pilgrims, the opportunity to journey slowly through strange and often unoccupied landscapes is one of the main drivers behind the decision to undertake such a task. Journals and diaries are filled with descriptions of the beauty of the landscape and the pilgrim’s relationship with the countryside which is unfolding as they journey. Frey’s study of contemporary pilgrims on the road to Santiago de Compostela documents the development of the pilgrim’s awareness of the landscape. She notes the feeling of many pilgrims of being at one with the landscape, part of creation, a ‘loss of self or creation of a greater self in the environment, the feeling of becoming one and joining with all.’²⁴⁴ This growing sense of place often leads to ‘a deepening perception of landscapes and the impacts they have on the psyche and the body.’²⁴⁵ The landscape becomes part of the pilgrim’s metaphor for their journey – the harshness of particular stretches of the road as the painful lessons that have to be learnt.

²⁴¹ Webb 2000, 174

²⁴² Webb 2000, 174

²⁴³ Webb 2000, 181

²⁴⁴ Frey 1998, 79

²⁴⁵ Frey 1998, 28

But this is more than a metaphorical understanding; it is a sense that place is part of the pilgrim's sense of identity, layered with personal and corporate experience: 'landscape then is not just a neutral backdrop but a multidimensional concept related to the understanding of space and movement and the creation of stories meaningful to the pilgrim. As the pilgrim journeys over the vaguely conceptualised Camino the steps and encounters are like stamps in the credential. At journeys end the spaces have been filled and marked with personal experiences.'²⁴⁶

As has already been written, the landscape in which Binsey is located is highly important to those who journey to it. The approach to the church is along a single lane track, which leads only to the church and to the manor house just to one side, where the track disappears. In high summer the church is not visible from the end of the track at all – only a weather-beaten notice on a small gate to the left of the main manor house gate indicates the presence of the church. Once through the gate the path winds past an enclosure of goats into an overgrown churchyard, the small church nestling by the manor house wall, the well to its left. The isolated beauty of the spot is clearly something that draws visitors to the place again and again: 'a beautiful place', 'beautiful discovery' 'on a beautiful day into the peace of Binsey'. These comments are a recurring theme throughout the visitors' books, emphasising the close relationship between beautiful places and spiritual experiences.

Stanley explores this phenomenon, writing of the efforts of the Forest Church movement to 'explore the characteristics of the Creator by exploring the creation.'²⁴⁷ He writes of the desolation caused by increasing isolation and attempts that are being made to correct this: 'There is a hunger and desire for a communal spiritual practice that connects with the earth and with a more manifest and creative God than the patriarchal, distant figures some see represented by established Western religion; a God of the forest rather than the sky; the Friend that walked with us in Eden.'²⁴⁸ Certainly visitors to Binsey appear to experience beauty then feel impelled to thank the creator of such beauty. Many comments lead from exclaiming on the appearance of Binsey to thanking God for this: 'beautiful place. God is here' 'Beautiful and peaceful place. May God and his holy Mother bless all who enter this place', 'beautiful place all for the greater glory of God'. Stanley describes Nature as 'the

²⁴⁶ Frey 1998, 75

²⁴⁷ Stanley 2103, 6

²⁴⁸ Stanley 2013, 13

second book of God'²⁴⁹ and in Binsey the connection between creator and created is linked so closely that it seems that the visitors share the same view of Nature as something to be inspired by, just as the poet Hopkins, a frequent visitor to Binsey,²⁵⁰ was inspired: 'Hopkins is inspired by nature not as nature, but as creation, as the pouring forth of the love of God which flashes and sparkles from every single instance of the change and motion which surrounds us as we confront the world'.²⁵¹

6.9 Manufactured environment

'Physical surroundings are still paramount in the recognition of a sacred place'²⁵² conclude Littler Francis and Martineau in their research into the perception of the sacred by visitors, and certainly the shrines of saints were designed to impress upon the observer how very special and sacred they were. The significance of land and ownership of land with respect to relationship with God has been discussed in Chapter 2, and this significance, dating from Old Testament times, has continued to influence the presentation of the sacred until the present day. The aim of the cathedral or shrine was to impress upon the viewer the holiness of the space, and this was often done by magnificence of architecture and decoration, in order to fill the observer with a sense of the grandeur and power of God 'They can be described as reflections of God's superabundance in creation, or even of the complexity, beauty and order of God's nature. They are a means of lifting our spirits into God's presence.'²⁵³ As architecture developed, so too did the loftiness and complexity of the buildings designed to house relics or commemorate important events. Medieval Gothic architecture, from which many of the extant cathedrals and churches were drawn, was designed to express the 'limitless quality of God through the soaring verticality of arches and vaults - a deliberate antithesis to human scale'.²⁵⁴ The ability to build large empty spaces, and huge windows to let in light and colour through giant stained glass windows increased the effect of the power and might of God: 'God was increasingly proclaimed as the one who dwelt in inaccessible light yet whose salvific light illuminated the world.'²⁵⁵

Inside these vast buildings would be a profusion of decoration, of rich treasures in metal, textile and wood, quite unlike anything the average pilgrim had seen before: 'the profusion

²⁴⁹ Stanley 2013, 13

²⁵⁰ See 3.0 A History of Binsey

²⁵¹ Groves 2014 forthcoming

²⁵² Littler, Francis and Martineau 2012, 198

²⁵³ Littler, Francis and Martineau 2012, 187

²⁵⁴ Sheldrake 2001

²⁵⁵ Sheldrake 2005, 9

of soaring columns, paintings and carvings of biblical scenes, stained glass windows, chapels, altars and golden bejewelled shrines bathed in the flickering light of candles must have been an unprecedented sensory experience.²⁵⁶ This sense of awe and wonder that is provoked by a magnificent building and elaborately decorated interior helped the visitor 'to perceive the church as a special place, linked to a spiritual consciousness of which in the everyday world they were relatively unaware'.²⁵⁷

Today there appears to be a sharp division into two types of pilgrimage – the first is 'where the destination is all important and the means of reaching it are of little significance'.²⁵⁸ These destinations - places such as Lourdes, Taize, Walsingham and to a certain extent Jerusalem, are the primary and often sole reason for the journey, and many travel companies have emerged to develop this – Bradley cites the Opera Romana Pellegrinaggi, sponsored by the Catholic Church, which transports over half a million pilgrims a year to various destinations. However, the primary understanding of pilgrim and pilgrimage now appears to be one where the destination takes second place to the journey. Previously held to be the place where meaning was found, a shrine 'permeated with the highly charged spiritual energy of a saint'²⁵⁹ is often now merely the indicator of the end of the journey – it is the journey itself that is the transformative experience. 'It is at least as much about travelling hopefully than arriving',²⁶⁰ writes Bradley in the conclusion to his book on pilgrimage, a strange contradiction in fact as much of the book is devoted to the sites and shrines that exist throughout the UK and Europe, and it is this tension that is implicit in much literature and discussion about pilgrimage. It is indeed about the journey, but unless that journey has a destination it becomes more of a 'wandering' more in common with Celtic spirituality.

From examining the visitors' books at Binsey, it becomes clear that although the church is a Grade I listed building, neither it nor the well in its churchyard are often visited for the purpose of experiencing awe and wonder at the majesty of the building, nor is the interior itself conducive to such feelings. The building is small, almost domestic in scale, and although the historical guide suggests interesting features, there is very little that is truly outstanding within or that distinguishes the church from any of the other hundreds of small

²⁵⁶ Harpur 2002, 84

²⁵⁷ Morris and Burton 2012, 63

²⁵⁸ Bradley 2001, 8

²⁵⁹ Hopper 2002, 123

²⁶⁰ Bradley 2001, 242

parish churches, each with their own particular treasures, scattered throughout this country. One or two entries note architectural features: 'A fine roof, if over strutted by more modern lack of confidence! Enjoyed the Clewer reredos and west window. Queen Anne Arms good.' 'Carpentry is magnificent, also the East facing Medieval stained glass windows. Interesting the statues of the Virgin Mary and St Christopher'. However, only one entry indicated that exploring the architecture of the church had been the main reason for the visit: 'we came to see the carvings'. What strikes the visitor more is the natural environment with which the church is surrounded, rather than the church itself. 'What a marvellous place - rus in urbe'.

Expressions of appreciation for the beauty of the church are linked to the beauty of the countryside and to the feelings of gratitude and praise that this evokes: 'With thanks for this lovely day, blessings to all who made this', 'very very very very pretty when the suns out', 'stillness of a blowing tree'. Once again the atmosphere of peaceful stillness within the church is what draws the visitor to reflection, rather than a sense of awe in the face of so much grandeur, or admiration for the cleverness of the builders and architects: 'My husband and I came across this beautiful place quite by accident. Reminded us of how thankful to God that we are for the fantastic life that we lead.' 'We come here at night and just sit here in silence in the dark'.

6.10 Guardians of the shrine and rituals of arrival.

After weeks of enduring hardship both physical and mental, suffering from the aches and pains that accumulate from days of walking, in some cases an unwelcome addition to the ailment for which healing is being sought, the pilgrim finally makes his embattled way to the entrance of the church which contains the shrine of the saint from which he will seek his favour. However, even at this late stage, barriers, both physical and ideological, could prevent that final achievement of pilgrimage. Numerous shrines were based in monastic churches, and the principle of monastic seclusion needed to be safeguarded; access to the shrines in these cases could be difficult or even impossible, and if the monastery was very strict, all women might find themselves firmly on the outside of the door to the shrine.

Once inside the building that housed the shrine, access to the relics of the saint might also prove challenging. Particularly on feast days and holy days, the main area of the church would be crowded with pilgrims and other visitors, from near and far. An early 14th century

visitor to St Peter's in Rome was struck by the vast numbers of visitors and the noise they generated: 'In the general hubbub people wept for their sins or read psalms aloud, some gossiped or ate picnics, while others sang in their native languages.'²⁶¹

Most major churches would not allow the pilgrims to look round the building alone but would be guided round the church by the appointed guardian of the shrine. At Durham, for example, the master of the feretory did not personally attend the shrine unless the visitor was particularly rich or noble, whereupon he would be summoned by his clerk.²⁶² These guides were often very restrictive, holding as they did the power to enable proximity to the saint's relics and thus to the power of the saint himself. Erasmus visiting Canterbury was appalled at the self-indulgence of the monks guarding the shrine of Thomas Becket, displaying his hair shirts in the crypt. His criticism was not for the visitors but the monks and 'their showmanship in delighting in the grisly relics skulls, jawbones, teeth, hands fingers entire arms' of various saints, and their greed in showing off the treasures kept beneath the altar.²⁶³

Once arrived at the shrine, various rituals were undertaken that would ensure the success of the request of the pilgrim. It was believed that the nearer the suppliant got to the shrine and the relics, the greater the chance of a cure - until the 15th century, the shrine of St Swithun 'probably stood on a feretory platform behind the high altar with a holy Hole beneath it which permitted pilgrims to crawl from the retrochoir underneath the reliquary and thus establish closer contact with the saint'.²⁶⁴ Once this had been undertaken, indulgences could be sought, candles lit, prayers made and masses attended. In the Cathedral of St James in Santiago de Compostela, the highlight of the daily pilgrim mass was the enormous thurible or botafumeria, which was swung high over the heads of the congregation, believed to have originated as a way of combating the smell of so much unwashed humanity in a crowded and overheated space.

For the contemporary pilgrim, arriving at one's destination can also bring with it that sense of achievement and accomplishment: 'pilgrimage is about the quest for the sacred and its goal is that moment when you arrive; exhausted but triumphant, at last standing on holy

²⁶¹ Harpur 2002, 84

²⁶² Webb 2000, 84

²⁶³ Ure 2006, 121

²⁶⁴ Webb 2000, 83

ground.²⁶⁵ However, the barriers that were in place in medieval times still exist, although in different ways – at the entrance to St Peter’s in Rome there is a dress inspection point, to ensure conformity to appropriate standards of modesty – a reminder that although pilgrimage celebrates a temporary stepping aside from ‘time, place and social structure’²⁶⁶ there is still a power structure implicit within the experience. Eade and Sallnow stress the power dimensions in their study of pilgrimage – it is a ‘realm of competing discourses’ where social barriers are ‘not annihilated but reinforced’.²⁶⁷

This is most clearly evident in the behaviour of the guardians of the shrine, self-appointed or otherwise, who attempt to impose order on the behaviour of the visitors, not just what they wear but how they behave. Thus a visit to the shrine of St James is carefully orchestrated by polite, but firm, guides who police the queues that build up behind long rope barriers as the pilgrims first put their hands in the depression in the column by the Portico del Gloria, then climb up behind the high altar and embrace the statue of St James and finally kneel at the shrine in the crypt below. Similarly in Rome, the Scala Sancta – stairs reputedly brought back from Jerusalem by Helena from the house of Pontius Pilates house – are carefully protected by boards which pilgrims can only ascend on their knees ‘meditating on the Passion of Christ and repeating a short prayer at each step.’²⁶⁸

Hermkens, in his study of Marian devotion, investigates the way these ritualised movements and gestures at shrines ‘provide cogency to the relationship pilgrims want to establish with the divine, with their fellow travellers, or with their inner self.’²⁶⁹ Outer physical movements, he writes, reflect movements on a second, emotive level these include emotional transformations and experiences of healing and relief, as well as all kinds of feelings of connectedness when experiencing Mary’s presence’.²⁷⁰

Conflict occurs when those who visit the site do not behave in the manner prescribed by the guardians of the site – the church officials, often clergy, sometimes volunteers but all subscribing to the same organisation and agreed as to the most appropriate way to honour the shrine. Sheldrake reminds us that ‘places in general whether sacred or not do not have

²⁶⁵ Du Boulay 1996, 5

²⁶⁶ Hermkens and Noterman 2009, 4

²⁶⁷ Eade and Sallnow 1991, 4

²⁶⁸ Bradley 2001 93

²⁶⁹ Hermkens and Noterman 2009, 4

²⁷⁰ Hermkens and Noterman 2009, 4

a single given meaning but are interpreted quite differently by distinct groups of people.²⁷¹ Many places now make efforts to train their guardians to enable experience with the divine in a way most appropriate for that visitor, rather than restrict them to legislated practises. This is seen clearly in Grace Cathedral, where the stewards of the nave labyrinth are told never to interfere with the activity on the labyrinth unless an individual's safety is at stake. The former Dean of Grace was very proud that this non-interference had extended to the observation but not the prevention of one labyrinth walker shedding his clothes item by item on his journey to the centre, dressing himself with equal deliberation on his way out again.

Lewis argues that holy places should 'aspire to be common ground where people can pray, light candles, reflect, meet others, learn of Christ, experience worship and go home renewed.'²⁷² Significantly he says that guardians of the site should not be called 'welcomers' as they traditionally have been as 'they have no right to welcome people because a welcome often implies the host welcoming the guest'²⁷³ but there is no indication as to how well this policy is actually followed.

Of course, for a church even to be deliberating on the nature of its welcome, the degree of intervention required by its guardians and the amount of ritual imposed on its visitors, it first has to have its doors open, and many pilgrimage sites have very restricted opening hours. On a journey along the Camino Ingles at Easter 2013 it was decided to pray at every church along the Camino – this had to be done in the churchyards as not a single one was open.

Binsey church presents no such barriers – once a visitor has found his way to the church, the door will always be open, and this is perceived as a tremendous gift by the visitors: 'Wonderful to find an unlocked church!' 'God bless you all! Please please don't close this church. It is saving my soul'. 'Thank you for keeping this holy space alive and open, even for latecomers seeking God's grace in the dark of the night'. However, it gives no help either - the only ritual available to commemorate a visit is to write in the visitors book – one person wrote 17 times in 21 days, leaving just his name, address and 'lots of love'.

²⁷¹ Sheldrake 2003, 5

²⁷² Lewis 2005, 41

²⁷³ Lewis 2005, 42

Others, less extreme, can be followed through the years as they visit, one name appearing at the same time of year over 12 years, another appearing irregularly but frequently.

In one way, perhaps, the visitors' book itself becomes the shrine, the repository of emotions and prayers, commemorations and conversations – books are discoursed upon, 'Recommended a visit by the late Sir John Betjeman. Just as he described it. Peaceful and charming', memories offered'. 'Ex printer Ox Univ Press local boy during WWII, now 75 years old we would walk from St Barnabas across these fields to Wytham Woods and onto the Eynsham Road' and states of mind shared 'Have lost track of the days I have come back married now as I said I would but still with a troubled mind.' The regular writers in the book become in this way the self-appointed guardians of the shrine – they initiate conversations: 'what the heck has happened to the chestnut trees' and even offer help: 'what happened to the French person whose words are crossed out? Are you there Stephen?' They act as arbiters of the appropriate 'please tear out the offensive message 2 pages back', and are even addressed personally 'To the Keeper of the Visitor's Book'.

Binsey, far from having no guardians due to its open door policy, in fact appears to have layers of guardians – those who write in the book, those whose frequency of visits give an unofficial and implicit power and authority, even the book itself. But most frequently of all, the church is given guardianship over itself. It is addressed as an individual entity in its own right, and many entries treat it as the reader of the visitor's book. It is addressed fondly: 'dearest little church', 'Beloved Binsey' and encouraged: 'Big up, Binsey!' Its welfare is commented on: 'Dear church hope you had the most great Christmas of all', 'nature saved you from the flood – nice'. It becomes unclear as to who is the intended recipient of the requests for prayers – other human readers of the visitors book, the clergy, St Margaret or the church itself: 'please pray for me and my intentions' 'thank you St Margaret's' 'I need your help again Binsey'.

6.11 Return Visits

The assumption is often made that for the medieval pilgrim, one pilgrimage per lifetime was enough, and indeed that is often the case. A journey to the major destinations such as Rome, Santiago and particularly Jerusalem took many months, sometimes even years. Money would have to be saved for some time beforehand in order to afford the sea crossing at least, let alone the other goods and necessities that might be required during

the time to come. Even the poorest pilgrims, who proposed to live off the charity of others, might want to take some funds with them in order to keep themselves from starvation if times became too harsh. On a lengthy trip, all sorts of difficulties and dangers would have to be faced and overcome, from uncongenial travelling companions to attack by bandits or even the threat of being caught up in a local conflict. All this made the very dangerous, even life threatening and not to be undertaken lightly – many pilgrims would consider that one such journey was more than enough. In addition to this, it might not be so easy to obtain permission to leave one's home community a second time – family and feudal demands could easily act to prevent more than one such undertaking in a lifetime. However, there is evidence that some pilgrims found so much satisfaction in the journey that they did indeed make more than one. The Worcester pilgrim's skeleton demonstrates the effect that numerous rigorous journeys might have on the physique, so the spiritual benefit must have been considerable. The notable Margery Kempe made three major journeys in her lifetime, in 1413, 1417 and finally in 1433, each lasting many months and covering the Holy Land, Italy and Rome, Spain and Santiago as well as German and French shrines.²⁷⁴

Some people became permanent pilgrims, helped perhaps by the amnesty that existed for criminals which meant that those convicted of crimes could not be punished while they were on pilgrimage, or by the knowledge that pilgrimage was the only legitimate way of travelling if one had feudal obligations back home.

However, this is only the case for the major pilgrimage destinations. As already discussed, there were many hundreds of small, local sites scattered around the English countryside. These were mostly not the destination of major journeys, although very often they became a 'stopping off' point for those whose destination lay elsewhere. It was common for those on major journeys to stop at smaller shrines along the way, thus accumulating time off from purgatory and a spiritual blanket of protection for the journey. For those who lived near these shrines, it would have been a usual activity to go and pray at the shrine of a saint whose life might give them particular power over certain types of illness or distress. St Frideswide's well at Binsey is one such example – since Algar was struck blind and according to some sources later healed after he had repented of his actions towards Frideswide, the waters of the well became notable for healing those with disorders of the

²⁷⁴ Bradley 2001, 54

eye. Similarly St Margaret of Antioch freed herself from the stomach of a dragon and became associated with the trials of childbirth. It would be an ordinary event, therefore, for those with eye conditions or those expecting a child to make a journey to Binsey to pray there. As Coleman and Eade put it, this was no 'distant one off journey, but like going to the local market'.²⁷⁵

Webb gives an example of the family of a merchant George Celys living in Calais in 1479, who on hearing of his illness, went every day from their home in Aveley, Essex to pray at a shrine 'they goys a pillgrymage dayly for yow' and postulates Pilgrims Hatch a secondary shrine to Thomas Becket as the probable destination of this pilgrimage. In these domestic pilgrimages especially, it was the shrine and the saint that were significant rather than the church that housed the shrine 'the great church was simply a space within which the living story of God's dealings with the human community could be told through architecture, glass, stone and the liturgical assembly.'²⁷⁶

The same division into two types of pilgrimage can be seen in many ways today, although the tendency is only to use the word pilgrimage if a journey of more than a day is intended. Interestingly, this does not appear to be the case if a group of people journey – thus the day's walk from Berinsfield to Dorchester is known as the 'St Birinus Pilgrimage' and acknowledged as having a validity as such, whereas one person walking for a day to a church and back might be looked on askance were they to call that a pilgrimage. Just as in the Middle Ages, these smaller pilgrimages tend to be undertaken for more domestic reasons than the major journeys to international destinations. Pilgrims might wonder whether they will find spiritual truth in the space of one day, but might return to a particular site on a regular basis to pray for healing. Many of these lesser pilgrimages are undertaken in memory of something or someone. As Cragg writes: 'meanings call for memories to be visited, if their 'when and where' remain accessible. For these are important for the what and why within those happenings.'²⁷⁷ If made regularly and over a period of time, gradually each trip strengthens the connection so that subsequent trips are undertaken in memory of previous ones and the trip itself becomes the event remembered: 'The movement of departure and return is one of the ways in which we claim

²⁷⁵ Coleman and Eade 2004, 11

²⁷⁶ Sheldrake 2001, 59

²⁷⁷ Cragg 2004, 4

the place that is our own, and root ourselves where we belong.’²⁷⁸ This is born out in the questionnaire given to visitors to St Melangells Shrine in 2004 where there was a significant tendency for repeat visits: ‘as might be expected of people who were especially attracted to the saint, her shrine or its location, though a few regulars stated that they came to visit family graves in the churchyard ‘

This tendency for local sites to be regularly visited is one to be encouraged, writes Lewis, who calls it a ‘boomerang’ understanding of pilgrimage: ‘you may come, you may indeed be drawn to this place. In it you are on common ground for a time and we hope that you are found by God while here. ‘ However he adds a cautionary note: ‘but you may meet the risen Lord anywhere, so do not stay too long and certainly do not become obsessed by this place. Our only task is to send you on, renewed’.²⁷⁹

There can be no doubt that Binsey is one of the lesser, more domesticated shrines – no entries in the visitors book indicate that a lengthy journey was made with the specific intention of visiting the place. However, when a journey is made from a distance to the city, a trip to Binsey becomes part of the round of places that are visited: ‘once again it has been the highlight of my visit to Oxford to come to Binsey’.

Some visit to remember those who have died: ‘visited today and found peace and beauty in which to remember my beloved father ‘, some even to remember those who were buried in Binsey churchyard ‘whose great great grandfathers are buried here ‘. Some visit when they are in need of a spiritual strength that only Binsey is able to provide for them ‘once again this magical place has done its thing ‘. Some visit on an almost superstitious level to ensure success through exams – initial visits to pray for success are followed up by one giving thanks and presumably storing up positive feeling against any future requests: ‘ I return here again after four years to give thanks for the completion of my thesis’. Some write on a regular basis, with four writers with entries numbering over a dozen.

For these people, a type of power and status seems to be gained due to the number of visits they have made to Binsey. This might be because unlike the major pilgrimage sites, there are no badges or souvenirs offered to demonstrate that a visit has been achieved. The only way to record a visit is to enter it into the book ‘again here, again its good and

²⁷⁸ O’Donovan 1999 47

²⁷⁹ Lewis 2005, 47

again thank goodness its open'. The more visits made, the more significant the writer becomes in the story of the shrine itself. 'I can see the writing I had written in 5 October 2004. I find myself here again with the same feeling of peace and grace'.

6.12 Benefits from destination

As has been discussed earlier, medieval pilgrims travelled for many different reasons, using a variety of methods. For some, those perpetual pilgrims, who travelled to escape punishment, drudgery or simply to escape the realities of everyday life, arriving at a destination simply meant that a new destination now had to be chosen. For most pilgrims, however, arriving at the shrine of the saint was to arrive at the purpose of the journey. The reasons for pilgrimage have been discussed earlier – for those who had travelled in response to a vow made by themselves or others, the benefits of the destination lay in simply reaching it. Some had travelled to gain an indulgence, those medieval certificates that guaranteed the bearer less time in purgatory, in proportion to the length and difficulty of the journey and the status and significance of the saint whose shrine they had arrived at. These were obtained from the keepers of the shrines – some major sites such as St Peters in Rome had several saint's shrines and relics and indulgences could be obtained from them all. Others, such as Santiago offered a single certificate, none the less valuable. For others, however, the destination was only the beginning. These were the ones who had travelled seeking a cure, seeking spiritual physical or mental healing. These pilgrims had made a difficult journey under dangerous circumstances, many of them struggling with a debilitating illness, seeking the help of a particular saint, often associated with cures of their type of illness. The nearer one got to the saint, through their shrine or their relics, the more powerful the plea for help would be: 'The fundamental importance of the holy shrine was that it was understood, usually through the report of miracles occurring there, that they served to bridge the gap between the banality and suffering of the physical world and the elevated serenity and purity of the spiritual world'²⁸⁰ Every sick pilgrim hoped to be the recipient of a miracle.

If this healing did not occur immediately, there were two further options. The first was to obtain a souvenir of the visit, either in the form of a badge or parchment certificate or more powerfully in part of a relic itself. There is evidence that people went to great lengths to obtain fragments of stone from the tombs of saints, or scraps of soil from the

²⁸⁰ Hopper 2002, 120

surrounding ground. If a souvenir badge could be pressed against the shrine or the relic, that too conferred some of the saint's power onto the badge which could then be used for further intercession for healing: 'a portion of the relics supernatural power would be transmuted to and absorbed by the souvenir'.²⁸¹

However, 'to be the owner of a holy article attached to a venerated figure was one thing. But to be the recipient and subject of that figure's divine healing ability was the utmost consequence to the pilgrim.'²⁸² For some, any amount of effort was worth it to effect a healing, and they might spend many days or even weeks praying at a shrine, waiting for a miracle. Hopper even cites one pilgrim who was in fact cured but so concerned that the cure might disappear if he went away from the shrine that he remained there, refusing to move. Healing miracles would be certified by the registrar at the shrine who was also responsible for publicising the event, although that task would be done for him by the witnesses of the healing. For those unlucky souls who did not receive a cure, the reason for this would be put firmly on their shoulders – insufficient prayer or lack of faith or inadequate care in carrying out a vow would all be given as reasons for failure to be healed.

Today, similar scenes of request for healing can be witnessed, particularly at sites associated with healing, such as Lourdes in France or Knock in Ireland. Thousands of sick pilgrims arrive each day, in wheelchairs, on stretchers, assisted by carers, to pray at the shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes, to drink the water and to ask for healing. Fewer instances of healing are recorded than would have happened in former times, when the more miracles evidenced, the more famous the site and the more income received from petitioning pilgrims. However, there are cases of healing: Since 1858 when Bernadette Soubirous had the first of a series of visions of Mary, 200 million pilgrims have visited the site. There are 4.000 cures certified by the Bureau de Constation. In this way, Lourdes has maintained its reputation as a 'place of physical spiritual and emotional healing, a place that gives hope to those for whom all other remedies have failed.'²⁸³

However, a pilgrimage in search of a cure is less common than the notion that it is within the journeying itself that a healing will be found, whether it is physical, spiritual or psychological. 'Do not lose your desire to walk. Every day I walk myself into a state of

²⁸¹ Hopper 2002, 131

²⁸² Hopper 2002, 123

²⁸³ Harpur 2002, 147

wellbeing and walk away every illness. If one just keeps on walking, everything will be all right'.²⁸⁴

As discussed previously, seeking healing from a physical ailment as a reason for pilgrimage is very low on the list today, and this certainly seems to be the case for Binsey. There are entries in the visitors book that request prayers for healing, and these fall into three main types. The first are simply comments that Binsey is a healing place: 'a beautiful place for healing', 'a place for reflection and inner healing'. How this healing is effected is not mentioned, nor is evidence given that healing has occurred. It may be simply that the atmosphere of Binsey had a healing effect on the writer but this is not articulated. Other writers do articulate this and give instances that healing has occurred and that Binsey is responsible for this: 'it is a wonderful place to heal wounds, help one's grief to emerge, calm oneself.' Those who feel they have not been healed yet sometimes simply write to this effect: 'my medical treatment didn't work....I pray for strength to go on '. Others ask for healing, sometimes from St Margaret: 'we ask for St Margaret's healing touch in this blessed place', sometimes in a prayer more openly addressed to an unspecified deity 'seeking comfort '. The least confident, perhaps, ask for prayers for healing 'please pray for me with mental health problems'. It may be that they feel others are better equipped than they to make a request for healing, or that the more prayers there are, the more likely they are to be heard.

The main benefits of arriving at Binsey are often not as specific as a healing – they are more a feeling of calm 'this beautiful secret place brings calmness to me', an appreciation of beauty 'so calm and so beautiful', a time of rest 'a moment of rest and a place of safe haven' and enjoyment 'apples, bats, organs, laughs '. These are sufficient to bring visitors again and again to experience the atmosphere of the place.

6.13 Proof of belonging

In the anonymous sequel to the Canterbury Tales, 'The Tale of Beryn', when the company of pilgrims have seen all the holy places in the Cathedral and heard mass 'the members of the company go forth to dinner and buy themselves souvenirs so that people back home may know where they have been.'²⁸⁵ The ultimate souvenir of course, would have been a relic, and the traffic in these was quite considerable, with leaders of monasteries or

²⁸⁴ Kierkegaard 1978, 215

²⁸⁵ Webb 2000, 85

churches seeking to purchase cheap relics with which to augment the status of their own place of worship and increase the income from offerings at these shrines. However, for those who could not afford a relic, other souvenirs could be obtained. These souvenirs would occasionally be small ampulae of holy water, and after the 12c, market traders in Jerusalem would pile their stalls high with palms 'set beneath the walls of the tower of David'²⁸⁶. For pilgrims seeking a souvenir of Santiago de Compostela, it was traditional to trek out to the tip of Spain and collect a cockle shell from the coast of Finisterre. However, by the early 12c, this trek was no longer necessary, as the market held outside the north door of the cathedral offered plenty of opportunities for purchasing shells. Before the end of the 12c, the real shells had been replaced by small badges in the shape of a shell, following the practice of almost every major pilgrimage site. These badges, fashioned into a symbol of the shrine they represented, were enormously popular, relatively cheap to make and purchase and were proof that a pilgrimage to a certain site had taken place. They also bestowed on the wearer the privilege and status of a pilgrim, entitling the wearer on his return journey to hospitality and shelter. Such privileges were valuable, and the Miller in 'The Tale of Beryn' is described as stuffing his shirt full of looted Canterbury badges,²⁸⁷ presumably to sell to those seeking free accommodation. These badges could also be used as proof that a penitential pilgrim had carried out the punishment required of them by civil or ecclesiastical courts.²⁸⁸

More significantly, these souvenir badges were looked on as receptacles of spiritual power. Pilgrims would lay them on the shrines or against relics in order to 'absorb their spiritual energy which it was believed would give physical protection against malefactors on the return journey.'²⁸⁹ Even once the pilgrim had returned home, the badge would retain its power and might be fixed onto the side of a house or cattle shed for protection. There is a record of a four year old boy being buried with a cockle shell, presumably to offer some sort of protection in the afterlife.²⁹⁰

Setting aside the superstitious benefits of the badge, these objects offered a proof of belonging to a group of people who had achieved something out of the ordinary, and as such had a tribal value. 'Much travelled pilgrims could cover the rims of their hats with

²⁸⁶ Sumption 1975, 174

²⁸⁷ Webb 2000, 73

²⁸⁸ Bradley 2001, 53

²⁸⁹ Bradley 2001, 89

²⁹⁰ Webb 2000, 75

badges until their heads were bowed beneath the weight of lead.²⁹¹ A grave in Helsingborg in Sweden contains a man buried with his pilgrim staff and no fewer than 10 badges from sites all over Europe. Clearly such badges were valued as part of a person's identity and status as pilgrim.

Today there is still a thriving market in souvenir pilgrim's badges, with the different sites retaining their distinctive badge, so a trip to Canterbury will result in a badge the shape of Thomas Becket's head, one to Chartres gets you a labyrinth and of course, the cockle shell is still obtained at Santiago. These last proliferate in the city, and are to be found hanging in shop window displays, from window sills, in hotel lobbies. Genuine pilgrims who have walked or cycled along the Camino look askance at those tourists who stroll around the city sights wearing a cockle shell strung around their necks, but true pilgrims can always be distinguished from imposter, not only by their footsore walk and generally unkempt appearance, but by the unadorned appearance of the shell they are wearing. Shells bought in Santiago itself are decorated with the red sword of St James. Those that have made the journey from a distance are ordinary white shells.

For a slight change has happened to the cockle shell in particular in that it has become an international sign of any pilgrimage. It has thus become a sign of intent rather than a badge of achievement – an erstwhile pilgrim will put on a shell before they travel as an indication of their status. A recent group pilgrimage to Binsey was given credibility by the act of presenting each member with a shell on a cord. The Sarum Missal of 1150 has prayers for the blessing of a shell, so presumably this was the case even in the 12c – perhaps however, it was not the international sign for pilgrimage that it has now become. Certainly the power of the shell to entitle the pilgrim to hospitality has not diminished – the author has benefitted many times from the status given to her as pilgrim by displaying the shell on her backpack, in ways as small as the offer of a glass of water to as generous as free overnight accommodation in a riverside holiday chalet. The shell too entitles one to membership of an international fraternity – many conversations have been started by the recognition of the shell and exchanging of information with fellow pilgrims.

²⁹¹ Sumption 1975, 174

A church visitors' survey undertaken by Littler Francis and Martineau²⁹² found that the availability of a gift shop was clearly seen as a benefit to church visitors. Binsey lacks such a resource. Indeed, apart from the occasional leaflet on the history of Binsey, there is nothing that can be taken away from Binsey to indicate a journey has been made there. There is no way of proving that a visitor belongs to Binsey other than attendance – and writing in the book. This need to prove that a visitor is a member of Binsey's community is possibly behind many of the entries in the book. These can be divided into those that try to show belonging by the frequency of their visit, hence multiple entries in the book, sometimes just leaving a name, sometimes a comment as well 'Khalil was here' 'Khalil again' 'Khalil'. Interestingly, Khalil not only brings his friends 'Khalil and Layla', 'Khalil and Ian', but comments on other visitors 'good to see that friends have been, Khalil'.

Others try to establish proof of membership of the Binsey community by detailing their family connection to the church 'I was born at The Limes, Binsey and christened in this church', or by the length of time that they have been visiting the church 'back again after 55 years', or by their intention to visit again 'first of many visits'. Some claim belonging by virtue of their love for the place 'Here again and again, thank you so much, the church is open. Someone described this church as the most numinous place in Oxford. Welcome to everyone discovering it for the first time.'

Entries into the visitors' book at Binsey can be seen as an attempt to claim membership of the community of Binsey. But this differs to the traditional proof of visiting and belonging in one major aspect. The purchaser of a souvenir of a visit does so as an outward gesture – the badge is so that others may identify him as a pilgrim who has visited a site – a particular identity, a particular place. It is a public demonstration, for those who may see him on the road, or for those at home when he returns. He may wear it at places other than the site – in fact it gains more credibility and power the further away from the site he is, as the journey thus becomes more significant and more of an achievement. For the erstwhile member of the Binsey community, proof of belonging can only be gained by writing in the book and is only for those reading the book. It has no physical place in the visitor's life outside Binsey, and no status outside that of the book. It is self-regulating and self-validating – there is no certificate, no badge, just an entry.

²⁹² Littler Francis and Martineau 2012, 181

6.14 Community found at site

The medieval pilgrim usually arrived at a holy site in a group. This group was determined either by the need for protection from outlaws and thieves, or formed part of the cortege of a nobleman, providing status and protection for the journey. It could be a very disparate group indeed – much of the charm of the Canterbury Tales lies in the fact that pilgrimage is one of the few places where people of radically different birth and upbringing are brought together to share an experience.

A considerable amount of time might be spent at the destination itself. It took a while to obtain the necessary proofs of arrival, some pilgrims might want to witness the church services more than once and there were always the ones who waited hopefully for a miracle. However, eventually the return journey would be made, and it would commonly be made once again with the original companions on the journey. Depending on the length of time it took to journey to and from the site, these companions would have spent a considerable amount of time with each other over the course of the journey, and deep connections would have been made.

However, these connections are ultimately utilitarian ones, and once their purpose – that of a safe journey – had been achieved, the medieval pilgrim would quickly have been absorbed back into his original domestic community, the tightly knit family-tied, place bound community from whence he had come. The pilgrim, reunited with his original community, may still feel part of the pilgrimage community – he may wear his badge as an outward sign of membership in this community. He may decide to become a member of a pilgrimage confraternity. The fraternities of St James were particularly active: ‘these sprang up in London and all over the continent as clubs of those who had made the pilgrimage; they conferred status and prestige on the members, and they helped to advice and even finance future pilgrims.’²⁹³

Today’s pilgrim may well also choose to travel in a group, setting out with a party of friends or as part of a guided group. They make the journey together, experiencing the advantages and trials of community living as so well demonstrated in Serreau’s film ‘St Jacques... La Mecque’. Others meet fellow pilgrims on the road and journey alongside them for a few hours, days or even the rest of the trip. Frey writes of the value attached to these

²⁹³ Ure 2006, 84

relationships, crossing as they do the barriers of class, age and culture: 'travelling alone for the first time and for two weeks on bicycle an electrician from La Coruna met a French professor his first day who became a close friend and a 'father figure'. They were the best two weeks of his life'.²⁹⁴As a contrast to this, many contemporary pilgrims choose to journey alone, that having gained the status of being the more 'authentic': 'times of solitude and silence are crucial parts of the experience.'²⁹⁵

Arrival at the destination affects only the dynamics of those who met companions on the way – these will have to return to their respective places of origin, the community becoming dispersed. Others will find a community at the site itself – that of other successful pilgrims who spend two or three days at the destination, recovering, visiting the sites and reflecting on the journey. Frey remarks on the sense of community that is experienced by pilgrims in Santiago: 'Interactions among pilgrims to process events, to debate the significance of the journey, to share fears and to discuss the future are an important part of the transition in Santiago.'²⁹⁶

Thus there can be three main types of community found at any pilgrimage destination. The first is the community that was brought with the pilgrim from their home – their travelling companions. These may have been deliberately picked or forced upon them by virtue of their signing up for a group tour organised by an external body. This community travels with the pilgrim, will mediate their experience at the site, providing a witness and a mirror to the experience of the site. It is likely that the community will return with the pilgrim to his original destination.

The second type of community is that which is formed upon the road of the pilgrimage itself. It might be a tight knit one, whereby friendships made early in the journey develop into travelling companions who stay together for the duration of the trip, or it might be more loosely formed, meeting only at night in the hostels, or when rest days coincide. Communication with these might be kept up by entries in the hostel visitors' books, by intermittent phone conversation or by news from other pilgrims.

²⁹⁴ Frey 1998, 93

²⁹⁵ Frey 1998, 120

²⁹⁶ Frey 1998, 166

The third community is formed by pilgrims at the site itself. It is unusual for a pilgrim to return home the moment the destination is arrived at – time is usually taken to visit the shrine and the surrounding environment, to rest and recover before the return journey. At the site, pilgrims can be recognised by their level of fitness, their road weary gait and the ubiquitous pilgrim's staff. They may gather in cafes and bars to discuss their experiences and to consider the changes the journey has made to them.

All these communities can have continuity at the end of the pilgrimage, both in informal reunions, individual contact between pilgrims and membership of pilgrimage societies. The most prominent of these in the UK is that of the Confraternity of St James. Originally set up to assist and inform potential pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, the organisation has widened its brief to include many different pilgrim routes, both in the UK and Europe. Meetings are held to brief pilgrims on route conditions and answer questions about kit and route finding, lectures are given, books and maps published and a library service offered. Annual reunions for returning pilgrims can continue the feeling of belonging to a unique community. Frey writes that these reunions are the result of 'imagined communities' which 'link pilgrims through their bodily actions and a geography of pilgrimage routes to past, present and future travellers of the way.'²⁹⁷

Of these three types, only the first is evident at Binsey. There are many entries which detail groups, friends or families 'another lovely pilgrimage from Wolfson College', 'David Veronica and Sabina came together', 'the Eagles family here again'. The groups are more likely to call themselves pilgrims than individuals – perhaps it is perceived that the difference between a pilgrimage and a short walk is if a group carries out the journey. Then, however brief the trip, it can be called a pilgrimage. Or perhaps this is simply the force of numbers – if enough people call a trip a pilgrimage then it becomes one.

There is no evidence of communities forming along the road, but this is not surprising, as the walk from Oxford city is three miles at the most. It is not a very well-known walk and consequently the chances of seeing anyone else are quite small. The author has walked to Binsey many times, at all times of day, in all seasons, and only once met another person, sitting in the churchyard. Neither is there much chance of meeting anyone at the site itself, due again to the relative remoteness of the place. However, an examination of the visitors'

²⁹⁷ Frey 1998, 207

book provides evidence that there is indeed a community to be found at Binsey, it is simply one that is grounded in place rather than time. By writing in the visitors' books, visitors become part of a community that is linked through the place of Binsey, and share the effect it has had on them. 'Places form landscapes and landscapes may be defined as sets of relational places each embodying emotions, memories and associations derived from personal and interpersonal shared experiences',²⁹⁸ writes Sheldrake and the place of Binsey finds the foundation for its landscape in the visitors book and its community. For some, many visits are necessary to feel part of that community: 'again here and again good'. For others, it only needed one visit for Binsey to become a vital part of their emotional experience: 'still as peaceful as it was 40 years ago'. 'I came here two years ago and loved it so I have come again'. Many entries refer to childhood memories, either of times spent in Binsey itself 'I played in this church as a child' or memories that have been catalysed by visiting the church: 'This is my favourite church in Oxfordshire. It reminds me of my childhood'.

These memories form a fundamental part of the relationship with Binsey, and also with the community of the book, as identities are described and associations recollected: 'People learn to be who they are by relating to the foundational landscapes of childhood or to adopted landscapes that became significant because of later events and associations.'²⁹⁹

By contributing to the book, by writing an entry in it, visitors become part of the community of Binsey. They find within the book the validation and recognition of their feelings about the place and about its spiritual importance in their lives. It provides a place not only where the story of Binsey can be told, but where it can be added to: 'Memory embedded in place however involves more than simply any one personal story. There are the wider deeper narrative currents in a place that gather together all those who have ever lived there. Each person effectively reshapes a place by making his or her story a thread in the meaning of the place and also has to come to terms with the many layers of story that already exist in a given location'.³⁰⁰

The Binsey community is a hierarchical one, but in a unique sense. Gone are the distinctions of age, gender, nationality or social structure. In its place are length of

²⁹⁸ Sheldrake 2001, 4

²⁹⁹ Sheldrake 2001, 14

³⁰⁰ Sheldrake 2001, 16

association, vividness of affection and willingness to share experience. It becomes a place in which traditional power structures are missing, enabling new and different conversations: 'the interaction with other pilgrims may result in a strong sense of *communitas*, which engenders shared spiritual emotions and possibly a shared sense of the presence of the divine among them'³⁰¹. The geographical place of Binsey 'mediating a possibility for human life in community,'³⁰² which although not tied by time, is held together by place. The place of Binsey thus becomes the roadside place of the Good Samaritan, where 'there is reconstituted the lost common life of the Promised Land. That space becomes a place; but in doing so, it promises to become the place, the lost place which was the proper context of true neighbourliness.'³⁰³ Perhaps it is significant that true neighbourliness can only occur when the neighbours are absent.....'God bless all who pray here'.

6.15 Conclusion

A close and detailed examination of the various elements of pilgrimage, both in medieval times and contemporary pilgrimage, gives an opportunity to compare these with similar elements that occur during a visit to Binsey. In this way, the experience of Binsey can be seen to have many of the traditional elements that build together to form a pilgrimage, as well as some elements that differ significantly from usual expectations. Having studied the experience in fragments, the next chapters bring together the various components of pilgrimage and assesses whether in the light of these differences, the Binsey 'event' can be properly defined as a pilgrimage at all.

³⁰¹ Hermkens and Noterman 2009, 9

³⁰² O Donovan 1999, 47

³⁰³ O Donovan 1999, 54

7 CAN WHAT HAPPENS AT BINSEY BE DESCRIBED AS 'PILGRIMAGE'?

After careful analysis of both the medieval and contemporary traditions of pilgrimage, and their comparison to the site at Binsey, and the comments of visitors to that site, it must be considered whether the event that is a visit to Binsey constitutes a pilgrimage at all, or whether some other term must be found for it. Certainly a trip to Binsey can be said to involve some of the key constituents of pilgrimage, but whether this is enough, is debated below.

For many pilgrims, it is all about the journey: 'pilgrimage is about the quest for the sacred and its goal is that moment when you arrive; exhausted but triumphant, at last standing on holy ground.'³⁰⁴ The further the distance covered by the pilgrim, the greater the difficulties encountered and overcome, the more obstacles and dangers met and defeated, the more valuable the journey. Those pilgrims who travel by foot are given first choice of beds in hostels over those who travel by bicycle – those who travel by motor vehicle are not given admittance at all. The status of the shrine has some influence – the better known the shrine, the more significant the pilgrimage - but this is secondary to the actual fact of the journey. Returning pilgrims, both medieval and contemporary, are given a greater degree of respect according to the length and difficulty of their journey, and the tales they have to tell of encounters on the way.

For Binsey, journey must be an integral part of the visit, as there is only one dwelling within half a mile of the site – everyone who visits Binsey must journey there. Most visitors walk – the road is very narrow and there is limited parking at the church – over 55 entries mention the walk in their comments. Many visitors view the walk to the church as an integral part of the visit, 'the Lord has brought me to see this beautiful little church and I am enjoying the walk coming here with the beauty of the way and all the birds' 'I love to walk the lane and visit this church to meditate and pray'. However, the journey itself provides neither difficulties nor dangers, (apart from speeding tractors). It is not lengthy or demanding, and takes at the most twenty minutes. For those who would have the pilgrim journey a challenge in order to prove itself worthy as a pilgrimage and the walker a worthy pilgrim, Binsey is not the answer.

³⁰⁴ Du Boulay 1996, 5

In addition to this, there are those visitors who arrive at the place by accident 'I've been here by accident, just walking I discovered this place', 'what a wonderful find this is on our Christmas walk. 6 years I've been in Oxford and I never knew it was here'. Although the surprise of Binsey is greatly appreciated 'what a treasure', the concept of pilgrimage as a journey with a purposed destination does not fit with serendipitous Binsey.

However, happening upon the church, and appreciating its spiritual value could well fit with the Celtic concept of journeying, as wandering with no fixed destination in mind: 'Ready to go wherever the spirit might take them, seeing themselves as *'hospites mundi'* - guests of the world.'³⁰⁵ Viewed in this light, the journey to Binsey gains greater credibility, since it is not carried out in order to gain recognition by the world: 'such as that of reaching a shrine or a holy place which allows the pilgrim at the end of the journey to return home with a sense of mission accomplished.'³⁰⁶

The concept of sacred space and the importance of place has been discussed in the introduction, and for the purposes of this research, agreed that one of the characteristics of a pilgrim destination is the feeling that 'the veil between heaven and earth is slightly pulled aside so that the pilgrim gains a little glimpse of the other world, the heavenly realm.'³⁰⁷ That Binsey is a sacred place is recognised by many visitors: 'Andrew, Adelaide, Karin and Tania visited this sacred place at dusk and deeply appreciated its tranquillity', 'what a beautiful church. How sacred'. This accords well with the traditional interpretation of a shrine as being set aside in some way, particular to God. However, it could be argued that in order to be properly a pilgrim destination, the sacred nature of the place should be externally verified: 'The whole idea of a place of pilgrimage depends on the acknowledgement of the importance of place and on a realisation of the rightness of a sense of locality.'³⁰⁸ Most frequently this verification is brought about by the attaching of miracle stories to the shrine, either from long ago, such as Santiago de Compostela, or more recently such as Lourdes: 'At a holy place, God is revealed in some exceptional way, with healings or other miracles being the plainest revelations of this kind.'³⁰⁹

³⁰⁵ De Waal 1992, 9

³⁰⁶ De Waal 1992, 9

³⁰⁷ Boss 2007, 142

³⁰⁸ Sheehy 2007, 11

³⁰⁹ Boss 2007, 143

There are no such miracles linked with Binsey church. Even the original miracle which gave rise to the presence of the 'holy well' in the grounds of the church is only related in a few of the Frideswide manuscripts. However, although officially no records of miracles at Binsey exist, there is evidence within the visitors' book that for many people, healing has been found at Binsey. This healing covers many aspects – physical, mental and spiritual. One entry recounts a visitor's joy at the birth of her daughter after years of prayer in Binsey 'this evening we visited the church with our new-born daughter'. She does not accord the birth as a Binsey miracle, but instead describes the comfort she found there 'during the years of longing for a child I often visited this church for solace'. Another visitor tells of their fear that healing would not happen 'I was told this was a place of peace and healing. I was scared to come in case I hoped for too much. ' They too find healing here: 'its perfect – a feeling of restoration of my soul'.

Peace, healing and encounters with God are all recorded 'found peace and healing', 'found peace and tranquillity', 'God is here', 'I thank God for his calming love'. Inge writes that a pilgrimage place is holy 'holy by virtue of sacramental encounter..and the resulting effect of such encounter on the lives of men and women'³¹⁰, and there can be no doubt that in Binsey people experience 'the transcendent, the timeless moment, a universal God'³¹¹ This can in turn lead to a transformation of self.

Wright distinguishes between pilgrims and tourists in that pilgrims are those who are prepared to be changed. Hermkens defines the actions of those who visit Marian shrines as a way of gaining some power to 'shape their own lives and the world they live in.'³¹² Some of those who visit Binsey do indeed come as tourists 'we came to see the carvings'. Others arrive to visit items of architectural interest but find that they have also encountered the sacred: 'architecturally fascinating and spiritually enlightening'. Individuals arrive seeking the peace or strength they need to continue with their lives: 'enjoying a calming walk and the peace here before continuing finals'. Still others are surprised by God's presence 'in your church she is closer to God' 'There are no words. Thanks be to God'. Dyas writes that tourism ends and pilgrimage begins when 'observer becomes a participant, when the experience of travel becomes infused with recognition of the need for change.'³¹³ The

³¹⁰ Inge 2003, 91

³¹¹ Du Boulay 1996, 5

³¹² Hermkens and Noterman 2009, 9

³¹³ Dyas 2012, 103

visitors' book is a witness to that recognition: 'this church has changed the whole aspect about how I think about JC. Big up Binsey!'

One of the joys of pilgrimage mentioned by pilgrims in all places and times is that of encountering new and wonderful people, and the subsequent conversations and exchanges that take place. The pilgrim community has been discussed already, but is a strong feature of pilgrimage: 'New awareness of world, sense of wonder, discovery, entry in to new community of travellers...'³¹⁴ As has already been written, there is no such community of travellers to Binsey, as the journey is too short to encounter many other people on their way to an isolated and not greatly visited place. Instead, the community is found within the visitors' book – a virtual community, tied by place not time. This virtual nature, however, does not invalidate the community, or its importance. Indeed, the community of the visitors' book provides the validation for Binsey as a sacred space, in that the stories of encounters with the transcendent are recorded in this book. As McConville writes on the significance of shrines: 'What is important about places is the memories attached to them by particular traditions.'³¹⁵ Similarly, Inge describes a sacred place as a place 'into the story and fabric of which the divine human encounter has worked itself so that they have spoken and can still speak to people of a God who makes manifest through the material and who in Christ hallows the material.'³¹⁶

The community at Binsey is not a journeying community, but it has journeyed to be there. They do not meet on the road, but in the book, but this does not invalidate the community as a pilgrim one, seeking God through healing and encounter, and sharing stories of these encounters with fellow pilgrims. The stories of the book, the revelations described, are part of the story of Binsey and its holiness, just as Inge describes: 'it is clear from the scriptures and the tradition, that God chooses some places for self-revelation to people just as God chose one place for the incarnation. It cannot be otherwise, since, as we have seen, places are the seat of meeting and interaction between God and the world. It is not that some places are intrinsically holy, but that this self-revelation on the part of God is then built into their story, and this makes such places worth of pilgrimage. It puts people in touch with their Christian story, their roots'.³¹⁷

³¹⁴ Dyas 2012, 94

³¹⁵ McConville 1999, 45

³¹⁶ Inge 2003, 91

³¹⁷ Inge 2003, 100

The events that occur on a journey to Binsey do not fit precisely into the traditional definitions of a pilgrimage – the journey is not long or challenging, the site is not famous or marked by miracles, the community on the road is non-existent. However, the important elements are all present, perhaps in a more unexpected form. The journey along the road to Binsey is seen as an integral part of the visit, experiences of physical, emotional and spiritual healing are recorded in the visitors' book, which acts as the validation of the holiness of the shrine. The road community is transformed into the community of the book, sharing the stories of encounter and transformation that are the fundamental constituent of pilgrimage. As McConville argues, pilgrimage is already a metaphor of the Christian journey, since the literal sense of pilgrimage as a journey to a sacred place has already been accomplished in the life and death of Christ. So any journey can now become a way of looking again at the earthly places we inhabit and seeing them in the light of Christ's love: 'For Christians the metaphor of pilgrimage already exists to depict the eschatological reality inaugurated by Christ and by which they live. They do not need to re-enact its literal referent so that that can then somehow become the metaphor of a metaphor.....would it not be more appropriate to say that any journey undertaken for spiritual benefit or growth in discipleship can be a means of fuller appreciation of the realities expressed in the pilgrimage metaphor by which we live'.³¹⁸

From this point, it is proposed to examine further what actually does take place at Binsey, in the form of its relationship with traditional visitor experiences at other churches, and the expectations of such a visit.

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³¹⁸ McConville 1999, 43

8 WHAT IS FOUND AT BINSEY?

As has been written, the community that is found at Binsey is not one that is gathered in time, but rather in place. Very few of the visitors' book entries describe arriving at the church with a large party of people, and the attendance figures for Evensong and the other official services of the church indicate that it is not in groups gathered for worship that the impact of Binsey is to be measured. Rather it is in a community tied together by place, where individuals arrive and depart at times that are suited to their own needs, rather than the dictates of the Church. For this community, the visitors' book is the vital link, enabling wisdom and tradition, memory and story to be passed along. However, there are other links which can be established amongst the members of the Binsey community, characteristics that are shared, features of human life that are felt to be important, and which can be nurtured by Binsey and its community.

In this, Binsey and its community can be compared to the places of worship studied by Littler, Francis and Martineau using a questionnaire for visitors to rural churches. Littler, Francis and Martineau were investigating the characteristics of a holy place, and what made a rural church holy. 'First and foremost, a holy country church is a place where it is possible to find somewhere quiet to pray. Holiness is associated with peace, quiet and prayer.'³¹⁹ The holiness of Binsey is often commented on, and is usually linked with peace 'sometimes I just know I need to come here, just for the peace of this holy place', 'so peaceful and holy'. The linking of feelings of peace with a feeling of holiness is also remarked on by Morris and Burton in their study of entries in a visitors book: 'Generally all these non-specific comments show the appreciation of a place of reflection where visitors can find an opportunity for contemplation, a sanctuary of quietness and the provision of a place of refuge from the pressures and stresses of modern life.. In this sense it shows that a substantial number of visitors realise consciously or unconsciously that what they have received is a spiritual experience.'³²⁰ Morris and Burton go on to state that often this feeling of holiness is not linked with Christianity: 'These responses are not overtly Christian in their content but they display longings for a spiritual realization which the visitors did not find in the ordinary pattern of their lives.'³²¹

³¹⁹ Littler, Francis and Martineau 2012, 53

³²⁰ Morris and Burton 2012, 58

³²¹ Morris and Burton 2012, 57

For visitors to Binsey, the feeling of holiness engendered by a visit to the place is sometimes associated with God: 'a place for the holy spirit', but many more times the feeling of holiness is not linked with any Christian feeling, and occasionally it is actively non-Christian: 'a holy and magical place' 'it's great that pagans and Christians can share this place. A holy well in both'.

Littler, Francis and Martineau also cite beauty as an essential for making a rural church holy: 'a holy country church is a place where fresh flowers are in evidence. Holiness is associated with the beauty and fragrance of fresh flowers and with the love and care of those committed to arranging fresh flowers in a church kept open and ready for use by parishioners and tourists.'³²² There is no doubt that that beauty of the setting of Binsey and its simple interior form a significant part of what draws the community to the place. The surrounding countryside, and the approach to Binsey are much commented on: 'I very much enjoyed walking across the countryside and visiting this beautiful church' 'the peaceful atmosphere of the church blends with the countryside around'.

As will be discussed later, when the surrounding environment is perceived as damaged, this has a significant impact not only on the aesthetic value of Binsey, but on its spiritual value as well 'I too am horrified by the wanton destruction of the wonderful old chestnut avenue which was so much a part of this holy place'. The interior does have some healing effect 'the calm atmosphere of the church helps restore you after the scene of violence outside', but this does not seem to be determined by the presence or absence of flowers or other signs of care in the church. Indeed, flowers are hardly mentioned at all. Occasionally it is evident that the flower arrangements from a festival or wedding have been left behind and these are appreciated 'Easter Sunday the flowers have been arranged with such care it is a pleasure to see'.

There is one comment that implies Binsey does not look as if it has had the 'love and care' that Littler, Francis and Martineau questionnaire respondents require for a place to be holy: 'Binsey seems a bit neglected. Would you not offer a few flowers?' However this comment is responded to in the comment immediately beneath 'Left in peace for now, not neglected, and the flowers are waiting for spring'. This answer seems to satisfy future visitors, and the comments on the interior of the church focus on its simplicity and the

³²² Littler, Francis and Martineau 2012, 183

sense of it being almost abandoned, so deep is the peace within: 'this church is a better place for its simplicity and beauty', 'lovely simple church' 'simply beautiful'. For Binsey visitors, the holiness of the place lies in its simplicity, which gives peace 'a beautiful place of holiness and simplicity' 'a thoroughly unexpected place of God's peace and simplicity', 'charmed again by this simple shrine to God'.

Littler, Francis and Martineau's final perceived requirement for a small country church to be 'holy' in the estimation of its visitors is that of evidence of a regular worshipping community 'a holy country church is a place which is actively used by the local Christian community and which is pleased to make known details about its time of meeting for worship. Holiness is associated with the life and witness of the worshipping local community.'³²³ Here again, this does not appear to be the case with Binsey. There is some indication of the times of services in the church, but these are infrequent and not very well attended. The very isolated nature of Binsey appears to be part of its attraction. It is perhaps because it is not perceived to have a particularly strong worshipping community that visitors can feel part of the community so easily: 'a rare privilege, to be alone in God's house, thank you', 'beautiful in its divine loneliness'. For Binsey visitors, this isolation becomes connected to a sense of timelessness – perhaps because it has no evidence of worshippers, it can more easily be imagined as unchanged throughout the centuries: 'how wonderful to find a place so untouched by time and society' 'go back in time – just enjoy'.

Timelessness is another aspect that is linked with holiness 'this holy place is timeless and inspiring' 'a sanctuary out of time', 'evocations of timelessness and a fundamental sacredness', 'God is all around. I feel like I have stepped back in time'. Small wonder, then, that actions such as the felling of the chestnut trees, which indicate that time does have an effect on Binsey, are greeted with such horror. This could be partly due to the fact that the Binsey which is encountered on a return visit is so markedly different to the Binsey that was pictured in the mind's eye and had been used as a talisman in difficult times 'how very sad to come back and find the chestnuts gone' 'seeking peace from one tragic loss I am confronted by the loss of the chestnut trees'. Comfort is found in the unchanging nature of the church itself: 'glad to see the church still the same after the shock of seeing the chestnut trees gone', although there are hints of uncertainty about even this: 'it seems they'll be knocking down the church next', 'what next – the church?'

³²³ Littler, Francis and Martineau 2012 186

Just like the respondents to the questionnaire of Littler, Francis and Martineau, the visitors to Binsey find holiness in the peacefulness of the church and the beauty of its interior and exterior. Any sort of change is seen as alarming, and commented on – the chestnut trees being the obvious example, but other interior changes also noted: ‘what happened to the rosary beads over the statue of the Virgin?’ ‘where is the stuffed owl which I remember?’ This attitude to change could be caused by the feeling that an essential characteristic of Binsey is its timelessness. It is important for visitors when returning to the church to find it the same as it was when they left. They themselves note changes in their lives, but are pleased that these signs of change have not affected Binsey ‘back at Binsey after my last visit before the birth of my first child, 9 years ago’ ‘I am here again after four years. I give thanks for the completion of my thesis. I have dreamed of this place all this time’. However, unlike the questionnaire respondents, they do not need evidence that the church has been cared for in the interim, and the presence of flowers is not as significant as the beauty of the external environment and the unchanged simplicity of the interior: ‘beautiful place. God is here’. ‘This place is beautiful, much more so than places all over the world built on a grander scale and with an intense desire to overwhelm the senses. I find more striking beauty here in the simplicity of the whitewashed walls than in the rows of stained glass’.

The final marker for Littler, Francis and Martineau is that of evidence of a worshipping community. For Binsey, the entries in the visitors’ book appear to take the place of that community – instead of a worshipping community, there is a writing one. Previous entries are read and commented on, life stories and beliefs shared – the similarities with a gathered community are evident, but the tie is not time but a book ‘Imagine hundreds of people here over hundreds of years through time and space’

Those who form the community of Binsey are looking for holiness, a spiritual refreshment that can be found in the peace, beauty and timelessness of the church and its surroundings. These people are tied together in community by a recognition of these common features, which are described and collated in the visitors’ book. Entries are piled up one after the other, witnessing to and affirming the feeling that Binsey is special. This perhaps serves the same purpose as the services of worship in other churches.

This corresponds significantly to the 'chain of memory' described by Hervieu-Leger. He identifies religion as being a system of organising meaning, which is 'based upon an identification with a chain or line of belief'.³²⁴ Binsey here is one of the places which can be described as sacred in that it 'crystallizes the feeling of radical dependence experienced individually and/or collectively in an emotional contact with an external force.'³²⁵ For Hervieu-Leger also, the sense of community or belonging to a 'chain or lineage' is dependent upon the existence of that chain being articulated and shared: 'The possibility that a group or an individual sees itself as part of a chain or lineage depends to some extent at least, on mention of the past and memories that are consciously shared with and passed on to others.'³²⁶

Here again the Binsey visitors' book plays a major role as the repository of the 'chain of memory' that enables a community, drawn together by its sharing of the common values of an appreciation of peace, beauty and timelessness, which for some constitutes the holy, to continue through the generations: 'what can I say? The power of simplicity and beauty and love and honesty' 'this magical place is a still point in life, a place where time stops and the divinity of life can be touched'.

The experience of visitors to Binsey church is that it is indeed a holy place, although it does not have all the characteristics generally attributed to such places. The most significant of these differences can be found in the type of community that is evident at Binsey. Instead of evidence of a worshipping community, which does not necessarily involve the occasional or even regular visitor to the church outside service times, a different type of community is present. This community is mediated through the visitors book, and its nature and characteristics will be examined in the following chapter.

³²⁴ Hervieu-Leger 2000, 107

³²⁵ Hervieu-Leger 2000, 107

³²⁶ Hervieu-Leger 2000, 123

9 WHAT SORT OF COMMUNITY IS FOUND AT BINSEY

As has been stated before, traditionally the pilgrim community was formed on the journey to and from a sacred site. Groups of people who often had little or nothing to do with each other, were placed in new and unfamiliar circumstances and surroundings, and had perforce to learn to live with one another and adapt to each other's idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. This enforced community was often colourful and lively – the pilgrims of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* are fine examples of the interactions of a random group of people with nothing more in common than a journey to Canterbury. This concept still exists today, as observed by Nancy Frey in her study of pilgrims journeying to Santiago de Compostela and the 'community on the road' that is formed. Difficulties experienced when one member of the group proved resolutely incompatible were usually solved by exclusion from the group, as in the example of the unhappy Margery Kempe, who was abandoned by her fellow pilgrims after days of continual crying and weeping out loud.

The anthropologist, Victor Turner in his seminal study of pilgrimage, drew on the work of van Gennep and applied the term liminality to the condition that pilgrims, withdrawn from their normal social position and community, found themselves in. Liminality is a term that describes the transition process accompanying a change of state or social position. Originally, liminality was applied to rites of passage processes in pre-industrial cultures. Arnold van Gennep in his studies of ancient and tribal societies demonstrated how change was managed. Individuals were detached from their established and normal role in society and after some ritualized passage of time, they returned, inwardly transformed and outwardly changed to a new place and status. This was demonstrated with particular reference to the rite of passage for boys to the status of men within their society. 'whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds'.³²⁷

Van Gennep's work was used by Turner, who refined the definition of transition processes and its three phases. Turner's work became the model for identifying and categorising rite of passage experience.

³²⁷ Van Gennep, 1909, 18

There are three phases of transition in any rites of passage process: separation, the liminal phase and aggregation. Separation is a detachment from established, embedded roles, comprising 'symbolic behaviour signifying the detachment of the individual or group....from a relatively stable set of culture conditions.'³²⁸ The second stage, the liminal stage, is one in which the subject is 'betwixt and between all familiar lines of classification.'³²⁹ It is a place of marginalisation, of change. Finally the 'subject returns to classified secular or mundane social life.'³³⁰ Turner searched for similar incidences of liminality in modern western life, looking first at religious rites such as confirmation and marriage. However, this did not satisfy the requirements of the special location of liminality – in most tribal societies 'initiations are secluded in a sacralised enclosure' ³³¹This requirement, concluded Turner, was best met by pilgrimage: 'for the majority, pilgrimage was the great liminal experience of the religious life'³³²

While in the liminal phase, a group is removed from prior sets of symbols and relationships and 'normal networks of classification no longer hold'.³³³ People discover one another on a different level, and an intense community spirit, a feeling of great social equality, solidarity and togetherness is formed. It is 'a liminal phenomenon which combines the qualities of lowliness, sacredness, homogeneity, and comradeship'.³³⁴ Turner argued that pilgrimage is in fact a liminoid phenomenon – a word coined by him to refer to experiences that have the characteristics of liminal experiences 'release from mundane structure, homogenization of status, movement from a mundane centre to a sacred periphery', but which are voluntary 'not an obligatory social mechanism to mark the transition from open site or status to another within the mundane sphere.'³³⁵ Within this liminoid phenomenon the community that was formed had strong ties which superseded all previous social and community ties and produced a feeling of solidarity and equality. This community Turner called *communitas*.

³²⁸ Turner and Turner 1978 2.

³²⁹ Turner and Turner 1978, 2

³³⁰ Turner and Turner 1978, 2

³³¹ Turner and Turner 1978, 4

³³² Turner and Turner 1978, 7

³³³ Roxburgh 1997, 50

³³⁴ Turner and Turner 1978, 250

³³⁵ Turner and Turner 1978, 254

Later studies of pilgrimage have modified this definition –Eade and Sallnow (2000) stressed the power dimensions of pilgrimage and argued that pilgrimage far from being a place without hierarchy was in fact a realm of competing discourses. Pilgrims do not all journey for the same purpose, and there is much discussion as to the position of one purpose in regards to another in terms of authenticity and validity. Similarly, Frey noted that : ‘The Camino is not bound to one place or time; rather it is a set of multiply constructed meanings in a variety of locations.’³³⁶ Once on the route, however, the travellers find themselves becoming pilgrims, both through their own expectations and through the culture around them – their identity is ‘socially conferred as well as personally created’.³³⁷

This in turn has an effect on how they see their journey and their own expectations of it. Far from breaking down barriers of difference, pilgrim could in fact highlight difference and introduce new ways of determining position within a hierarchy, - Frey cites mode of travel as being a particularly significant determinant, with those travelling by foot being considered as more ‘authentic’ than those travelling by bicycle. However, even with these caveats, the *communitas* that is formed by pilgrims travelling to sacred sites is still a well-known phenomenon and for many pilgrims, the most powerful and transformative part of the pilgrimage experience.

It has already established that no such *communitas* is formed on the road to Binsey, both because of the brevity of the journey and the small numbers of visitors journeying there. However, it has equally been established that there is a sense of community at the site itself. This is not unique to Binsey – Hermkens, Jansen and Notermans in their study of Marian sites of pilgrimage, note the interactions between pilgrims once they arrive at the sites: ‘the interaction with other pilgrims may result in a strong sense of *communitas*, which engenders shared spiritual emotions and possibly a shared sense of the presence of the divine among them.’³³⁸ In these cases, the place or shrine becomes the liminal space, rather than the journey to the place, and those who have arrived at the place form the *communitas*.

³³⁶ Frey 1998 p232

³³⁷ Frey 1998 p25

³³⁸ Hermkens and Notermans 2009, 9

For Binsey the possibility of *communitas* is made greater by the open nature of the church. These sorts of 'open minded spaces'³³⁹ foster community life, particularly when in the case of Binsey, there are no guardians of the shrine physically present to regulate how the space is used. Here the difference between the 'official discourse of the shrine and the private discourses and creative practices of the pilgrims'³⁴⁰ is not in place, and conflicts are correspondingly fewer. Sheldrake describes the act of pilgrimage as symbolising 'a state of liminality of living between two worlds, the material and the spiritual'³⁴¹. This state of liminality is achieved not on the journey to Binsey but at Binsey itself. Visitors enter the space, which includes the approach to the church and in doing so, enter a liminal stage, a 'betwixt and between', where they enter into a different mode of life, that of relationship and interaction with God. This experience is transforming, and at the end of the event, the visitors are changed in some way. More significant still is the formation of a *communitas* by the visitors while they are engaged with the church.

This *communitas* cannot exist in physical reality as the numbers of visitors present in the church at any time is very small. This leads to a problem of identification with the community and the mechanism of how this is achieved. Coleman and Eade ask significantly 'How much do we need to have our pilgrimage witnessed?'³⁴² and it has already been noted that the symbols of pilgrimage such as shells and badges have been in existence from medieval times to the present day. As Sheldrake notes, even hermits lived near civilisation rather than right away from it: 'Anthony the great and Simeon Stylites lived isolated lives by roadsides. It appears that monasticism in its origins should be viewed as having a prophetic role vis a vis the human city rather than simply provide an escape route into an alternative purified universe.'³⁴³ For Binsey, *communitas* is found within the visitors' book, which holds the story of the place and the events that have happened within it. This book helps to uncover the meaning of the place and its transformation from space to place: 'place is space which has historical meanings where some things have happened which are now remembered and which provide continuity and identity across generations.'³⁴⁴ The book is the place for sharing memories and associations which help build up the place and the community that inhabits that place: 'married here in 1969' 'Bob's 66th birthday'

³³⁹ Inge 2003, 9

³⁴⁰ Hermkens and Notermans 2009, 9

³⁴¹ Sheldrake 2001, 91

³⁴² Coleman and Eade 2004, 91

³⁴³ Sheldrake 2001, 94

³⁴⁴ Sheldrake 2001, 7

These associations are not uniform or singular however. As Sheldrake also notes: 'places in general whether sacred or not do not have a single given meaning but are interpreted quite differently by distinct groups of people.'³⁴⁵ The entries in the visitors' book, varying as they do from memories of past experiences to discussions on nature: 'how beautiful God's green earth is this morning', book reviews: 'read about Binsey in a book by Thomas Joy' and pleas for prayer: 'pray for my unborn daughter', demonstrate that Binsey is a many layered place of meaning and this has a significant impact on the form of community that exists there.

In 1967 Foucault introduced the concept of heterotopias in a paper entitled *Of Other Spaces*. This took the argument that the common experience of the world was 'less that of a long line developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein.'³⁴⁶ He stated that the concept of time and place had changed and developed through history, beginning with the Middle Ages with its hierarchic ensemble of places: sacred places and profane places, protected places and open, exposed places, urban places and rural places. The discoveries of Galileo led to a different constitution – that of an infinite and infinitely open space. The place of the Middle Ages was dissolved, - a thing's place was no longer anything but a point in its movement. 'Extension was substituted for localization'³⁴⁷. In current times, he argued, we had moved onto the concept of the site – defined by 'relations of proximity between points or elements.'³⁴⁸

The anxiety of our era, said Foucault has to do fundamentally with space. We do not live in an empty space, but a space that is thoroughly imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well. There also exist 'sites that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize or invent the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror or reflect.'³⁴⁹

These sites cannot be defined as utopias, as utopias are fundamentally unreal, presenting society either in its perfected form or else society turned upside down. Instead Foucault coined the word heterotopia to define this type of site. Unlike utopias, heterotopias do

³⁴⁵ Sheldrake 2001, 5

³⁴⁶ Foucault 1967, 1

³⁴⁷ Foucault 1967, 2

³⁴⁸ Foucault 1967, 2

³⁴⁹ Foucault 1967, 3

exist. They are 'effectively enacted utopias in which all real sites are simultaneously represented, contested and inverted.'³⁵⁰

Heterotopias are defined as having six main features, the most significant being their universality - there is not a single culture in the world that fails to constitute heterotopias. They take quite varied forms, but fall into two categories. Crisis heterotopias are privileged or sacred or forbidden places, reserved for individuals who are in a state of crisis – menstruating women, adolescents, honeymoon trip. In this instance, Binsey can be seen partly as a crisis heterotopia – people are drawn to Binsey in times of crisis, not just that of physical health, but seeking courage and spiritual strength for difficult situations: 'Finals this time', 'I came for a top up of strength'. Couples get engaged to be married in Binsey, itself a liminal state between the current state of single and the future state of married: 'Today here in this church, Rebecca Clifford said she will marry me!'

Heterotopias of deviation are those in which individuals whose behaviour is deviant in relation to the required norm are placed: rest home, retirement homes, and prisons. Foucault stated that societies can make existing heterotopias function in very different fashions. They can also have different functions at different time. An example cited by Foucault is the cemetery, whose function has changed through the years with the different approach to death of subsequent generations. Here again, the function of Binsey has changed from abbey retreat centre to parish church to gathering place for community.

These heterotopias juxtapose in a single real place several spaces that are in themselves incompatible. The example is given of a cinema, which consists of one room with a two dimensional screen, on which one sees projections of three-dimensional space. They are linked to slices of time, which happens in two ways. Some sites are indefinitely accumulating time, sites such as museums and libraries where 'time never stops building up and topping its own summit'.³⁵¹ In other sites, time is seen at its most transitory, as for example in festivals. For Binsey, this too is evidenced in the visitors' book – the visit made is transitory and fleeting, but the contribution to the book builds up a series of memories of events that contribute to the sacredness of the place. Binsey is in common with other sacred places in that: 'they focus the piety and faith, power and merit, of Christian saints of the past and trigger a faithful response in living Christians. They afford a concrete

³⁵⁰ Foucault 1967, 4

³⁵¹ Foucault 1967, 5

expression of the idea of the Communion of Saints, the view that all believers of all ages and places, and whether dead or alive, share together in the life of God.³⁵²

Heterotopias contain a presupposed system of opening and closing that both isolates heterotopias and makes them penetrable. They are not freely accessible like a public place. Either entry is compulsory as is the case with a prison or barracks, or people must submit to rites and purifications. Binsey is left open all the time, but in order to belong to the *communitas* of the book, entries have to be made within it, the rite of belonging.

All heterotopias have a function in relation to the real space that remains. This function unfolds between two extremes. Either the role is to create a space of illusion that exposes every real space as still more illusory, or it is to create space that is as 'perfect, meticulous and well-arranged as ours is messy, ill-constructed and jumbled.'³⁵³ Binsey accomplishes both roles in that it provides a reminder of eternal place : "supernatural geography, a territory of faith, in which believers see themselves depicted as part of the great community of believers down the years all moving towards Gods final sacred place. '³⁵⁴It is still the case that human beings encounter God within relations of particular belonging; for this reason the Christian church has always to be structured as local church; yet God is not tied to any one particular, other than the name of Jesus Christ, but can make himself known through any and all; for that reason the church has always to be a universal church too.'³⁵⁵

Binsey does function as a type of heterotopia – it contains many of the elements of heterotopias. But this definition ignores the importance of other peoples experiencing of Binsey and the way that they share this. There is evidence of a strong sense of community, as demonstrated by the chains of conversation held within the visitors book, and comments addressed to the wider community of all who read the book 'peace be with you' 'hope your church always stays like this, charming', but this sense of community is perhaps more complicated than that of Turner's liminal *communitas*: motivations vary, experiences are dissimilar, the awareness of others can be a positive or negative experience. However, this is one of the strengths of Binsey – its ability to give a sense of community to radically

³⁵² Holm and Bowker 1994, 40

³⁵³ Foucault 1967, 5

³⁵⁴ Holm and Bowker 1994, 40

³⁵⁵ Cavanagh 1999, 182

different types of people in terms of age, gender, origin. Different people have different experiences but within same broad framework.

In recent years Turner's research with regards pilgrimage as a liminoid event, has been questioned. Researchers today assert that the feeling of *communitas* is not as strong as Turner described. Pilgrimage is not as he states 'impregnated by unity...purified from divisiveness and plurality'³⁵⁶ but is in fact a dynamic tension between inclusiveness and exclusiveness. This was reflected in the reactions of worshippers at the prayer station event who were both comforted and made ill at ease by the presence and behaviour of others. Bowman in his study of the 'super-shrine' of Jerusalem comments how the 'sacred centre par excellence of the Christian tradition paradoxically becomes the global focus for the display of its deep and pervasive doctrinal schisms'³⁵⁷

What becomes apparent from a study of Binsey and its relationship to Foucault's heterotopia and Turner's *communitas*, is that Binsey is a combination of the two, more complex than each on its own, but drawing on features of both. Thus the Binsey event becomes a space from which not only can reality be critically reflected upon, but a space which enables encounter with a greater reality. At the same time, in parallel with these engagements with realities, a community is formed among those who are experiencing the event and its transformational nature. This community is held within the parameters of the heterotopia, out of time and space. It is held by the visitors' book, which becomes both the community itself and the link for members of the community. This allows for greater honesty both in relationship with other members of the community and in reflecting on reality itself. This community formed within the heterotopia that is Binsey I have called *heterotopian koinonia*. This term was first used by the author in an MA study in prayer stations in rural churches.

Koinonia comes from the Ancient Greek for fellowship. It is used frequently in the Bible to describe the relationships that existed between members of the early Christian church, particularly in the letters of Paul (This word occurs 13 times in the writings of St. Paul (see e.g., I Cor 1:9; II Cor 13:13; Phil. 1:5 etc.). Like *communitas*, *koinonia* is deeper than merely community or fellowship. It contains the threads of an inner goodness in terms of spiritual

³⁵⁶ Turner and Turner 1978, 220

³⁵⁷ Bowman p14

integrity and an outer one geared towards relationships with others. There is always an implication of action included in its meaning: 'people who are gathered by the Spirit, blessed with many different gifts, and sent to bear witness with their lives to the same love and mercy of God for all the world which has been shown forth in their assembly'.³⁵⁸ The term is particularly appropriate for the formation of a community within a sacred place. The *koinonia* is not experienced in worship as is the usual case, but within the confines of the visitors' book a type of fellowship is expressed and developed. The World Council of Churches definition of worship can be used here, with the visitors' book in place of worship 'In worship Christians are able to express the *koinonia* that unites them and at the same time to find that *koinonia* nourished and strengthened'.³⁵⁹

Unlike Turner's *communitas*, the word *koinonia* contains already within it the spiritual element that is required when discussing events that take place within a sacred space. Similarly, *koinonia* recognises that motivations, characteristics and attributes of members may be very different, but still bound by its principles. There is room for flexibility and individuality within the term that is lacking in the more rigid definition of *communitas*.

The concept of the Binsey community as a heterotopian *koinonia* also finds a mirror in the desert places of the Bible. Complex, multi layered sites, which by being set outside society, both reflect it and allow space to reflect on it, the deserts of the Bible are the places from which the commentators and the transformers of society emerge. Thus Moses retreats even further from his people before bringing them the rules of life in the Ten Commandments: 'the Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai and called Moses to the top of the mountain' (Exodus 19:20). So too does John the Baptist use the desert as the place from which he will comment on the society of his time: 'John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet: I am the voice of the one calling in the desert 'make straight the way for the Lord' (John 1:23). . An extreme heterotopian *koinonia* is conceptualised in the form of Noah's Ark, which remains the only repository of sanity in a world in complete chaos! 'Everything on dry land that had the breath of life in its nostrils died. Only Noah was left and those with him in the ark' (Genesis 7:22,23b).

³⁵⁸ Best and Heller 1995, 11

³⁵⁹ Best and Heller 1995, 11

In addition to this Binsey acts as a heterotopian koinonia in that it offers space, like that of the Biblical desert, from where participants can critically reflect both on the world and on their own action within it:

‘Time present and time past

Are both perhaps present in time future

And time future contained in time past.’³⁶⁰

It offers a place outside time and space from which to engage with the greater reality of God in company with other people. A metaphorical journey, mirroring both physical and spiritual pilgrimage, it enables a freedom from within which to examine boundaries: : ‘We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started... and know the place for the first time.’³⁶¹

One example of this can be taken from the entries in the visitors’ book concerning an event that took place in 2003. Reactions to this event, and the way these reactions are discussed and explored in the context of the visitors’ book demonstrate both an awareness of a community bound together with common concerns regarding a particular place, and one which holds several different ideas as to the nature of this place and its significance.

In March 2003, the avenue of chestnut trees, which lined the last half mile of the approach to Binsey, was chopped down.³⁶² According to an entry in the visitors’ book, presumably by a churchwarden, these trees, on the property of Christ Church, Oxford, were felled because they were dangerous: ‘they were not church property and in any case were very dangerous. Two large branches had fallen: one blocked the road completely, the other did damage - luckily only to property not to people.’ The reaction to this event is momentous in the life of the visitors’ book and demonstrates the refinement of heterotopian koinonia that had been reached. From a stable, peaceful forum for comments on the beauty of the place, requests for prayer and a sharing of memories, the book becomes the site of an emotional series of conversations, focussed on the loss of the trees, but branching out into other areas. Even the writing in the book itself reflects the sudden and passionate change in tone. Usually a series of well written, tidy comments,³⁶³ the book is changed into the repository of untidy sprawling words, pencil or pen pressed deeply onto the page, large

³⁶⁰ Eliot 1975, 189

³⁶¹ Eliot 1975, 222

³⁶² See Appendix 4

³⁶³ See Appendix 10

writing with no care to stay within the lines. The first entry shouts out from the book, taking up quarter of a page with its sprawl: 'What the heck have all those trees been cut down for!!! That was a beautiful lane leading up to the church! Complete human insensitivity!!! Very angry.'³⁶⁴

From this moment, the book becomes a repository for conversation. Previously, fragile connections could be traced from one comment to the next, threads of conversation being held loosely by the entries, with periods of focus on one particular topic – thanks for beauty, shared memories, requests for prayer. With the focus almost solely on the loss of the trees, the book becomes a message board, with comments directed towards the next readers of the book, reflecting on previous comments. The book becomes a chain of conversation, with different themes related to the loss of the trees being explored and amplified by successive entries.

The episode of the felling of the trees is made more poignant by its similarity to the occasion for Hopkins famous poem 'Binsey Poplars'. Having studied at the University, Hopkins is sent back to the city after his ordination and acceptance into the Society of Jesus. He makes return visits to the places that he loved as a student, and is horrified, on walking out to Binsey, to discover that an avenue of poplar trees the other side of the Perch by the river felled. Although this avenue of trees is the other side of the village to the church, nonetheless, the poem has become linked to the entire village, including the church. 'Binsey Poplars' is a lyrical expression of loss and regret, not just for the beauty of the trees, but for a longed-for past and a vanished sense of security: 'felled, felled, all are felled' – the words sound like the tolling of a funeral bell, marking a great loss.

Like Hopkins, the initial reaction of the visitors to Binsey is one of shock and anger "please tell me the stupid reason for felling of those beautiful trees!!! Why?" This feeling is echoed by others: 'Yes I too miss the trees. Why???' It does not take long before these feelings are elaborated and take on further meaning, and the implications of this event are taken more broadly. This event does not just affect those in the present, but those in the past and the future as well: "think of the years it took those trees to grow. The generations that passed under them. ' Echoes of Hopkins concern are articulated in the misquoted 'after eyes cannot guess the place been'. The felling of the chestnut trees is more than simply

³⁶⁴ See Appendix 11

the removal of dangerous objects, it strikes a blow at the essence of Binsey, what it represents for the visitors. Bradley writes on the reaction of contemporary pilgrims to their landscape and the 'sense of the sacredness of place and landscape in an increasingly fragile and urbanised world'³⁶⁵

These feelings of shock and loss soon find an object against which to express their anger – that of Christ Church who owned the land and proposed the felling of the trees. The situation could have been avoided: 'they could have been carefully pollarded and supported where necessary'. 'Yes the chestnuts, with a little imagination could have been preserved.' There are suspicions that Christ Church took the cheaper course of action: 'Christ Church College's decision to cut the trees (contrary to the Council's recommendation) for financial reasons shows its priorities.' There is a feeling of helplessness in the grip of a large institution, of an inability to influence those who hold the power.

This is reflected in the work of O'Donovan on globalisation and the growth of multinationals: 'that is the economic doctrine which has its origins in the eighteenth century, treating land as a resource of industrial production.'³⁶⁶ Here the visitors are living with the consequences of that economic doctrine. This loss is not viewed in isolation, but its effects are seen spread out to the rest of creation. 'And the wildlife gained so much from the cover of the trees!' 'even old decaying trees provide unique habitats that have been destroyed'. The precious relationship between the visitors and the beauty of the surrounding countryside is seen to be damaged. This type of anger was observed by Frey in the pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, and their reflections on seeing the numbers of animals killed by road traffic: "you feel despair anger and sorrow for all that our civilisation runs over".³⁶⁷ When part of creation suffers, all suffer with it.

This feeling of community with nature is given interesting expression by one entry, which compares the felling of the chestnut trees with the damage done to the Huorns, trees that are partly sentient and have the ability to move. They are found in Tolkien's 'The Lord of the Rings' and are instrumental in some of the great battles that are fought between the forces of good and evil. The Huorns are part of a nature that lives in close harmony with all

³⁶⁵ Bradley 2001, 19

³⁶⁶ O'Donovan 1999, 45

³⁶⁷ Frey 1998, 81

creation, including all types of human and non-human beings. Their destruction here is symbolic of the forces of evil finally overcoming the fragile ecosystem of good: 'why did you cut down all those stately trees? Shades of Saruma and his Orks!'

The loss of the trees is a great shock and is seen as a significant loss, particularly to those who sought and found comfort and healing from Binsey. The effects of the loss are clearly not just upon the beauty of the place, but upon its spirit as well, and the capacity for healing that belongs to Binsey is seen to be in some way damaged: 'the avenue of trees was part of the church and holy well and was integral in making this a special place'. Just as Hopkins, in his search for rootedness and security views the felling of the poplars as impacting his own stability and roots, so too do the visitors fear the impact of the destruction of the trees upon their own psyche. For many, the picture of Binsey, its memory and image imprinted on their mind, is a source of strength even when they are not at the church. It is something they can draw strength from even when they are away from Binsey, simply by calling it to mind: 'I am here again after four years, to give thanks for the completion of my thesis. I have dreamt of this little church all this time. Thank you'. To return and discover the image has changed has a serious impact. 'The loss of the trees is a palpable shock when first encountering it - similar to amputation'. For some this is manifest in a fear that other changes will be effected – even to the church itself: 'the cutting down of the beautiful old trees is criminal maybe the church is next?' 'it seems they will be knocking the church down next to get rid of all that spiritual nonsense'.

The guardians of the road to the shrine have been demolished – this in turn puts the shrine itself at risk. 'An avenue of trees is a cathedral like spiritual place part of the spirit of this place has been senselessly desecrated.'

The felling of the trees is seen by some, as a metaphor for their own lives, and the shock has a significant impact. Feelings of mental pain and anguish are detected from the entries in the book: 'seeking peace from one tragic loss I am confronted by the loss of the trees.' 'Just a prayer that is what has happened to the trees is to happen to me. That I might have the strength intelligence and humility to find you through it'. 'Such a sad sight. I never saw'. The symbolism of the destruction of the trees is immediately apparent to those affected by it: 'Pray for Sandy please that she finds an anchor in the midst of a dreadfully sudden loss. Somehow the loss of the chestnuts is quite symbolic.' When one entry tries to put the other viewpoint: 'please stop complaining about the felled trees', there is an instant and sharp response: 'seems to me the church is precisely the right place to bring a

sense of loss and express it, whether for people or trees or anything else of beauty'. This is taken one step further by one visitor, whose views on the cycle of life and death are perhaps more extreme: 'we should remember that life is out to kill us and if a branch falls on our heads, despite the tree being carefully managed, then perhaps the Church is the place to look for an answer, not to blame the trees' Ironically, the one place appropriate for the mourning of the loss of the trees is the place most affected by it. Thus the church becomes both the object that suffers and the provider of comfort for that suffering – a paradox at the heart of Christianity itself: 'The Chestnuts!! Chopping the avenue down was close to blasphemy'. The destruction of the trees and the feelings it provokes become part of the message of Christianity – as Lewis writes 'the world in all its diverse aspects can be the place of Gods own self-revelation to us.'³⁶⁸

Not all the entries are as vocal in their anger; some find that the complaints about the trees are simply annoying: 'Can people shut up about the bloody trees. There will be more'. This meets with a sharp and curt response 'Yes in two hundred years' time', and the litany of grief continues. However, even in the midst of the rage, there are ideas not only for how this could have been avoided but how this situation can be amended and improved: 'Yes, let's hope more trees are planted'. 'I do hope the beautiful old avenue of horse chestnut trees is replaced soon.' Already the problems solvers are at work, seeking to find a solution to a difficult situation: 'how very sad to come back and find the chestnuts gone! But this church remains a unique haven.' There is a feeling that the essential spirit of the place is still present, perhaps even the essence of the trees themselves, has been absorbed into the rest of the surroundings: 'I could feel the ghosts of the old conker trees as I cycled here.' Visitors are reminded that change is part of life and must be accepted: 'been visiting for 55 years. Yes, let's hope more trees are planted. But change is always with us.' The cycle of life and death, as evidenced by the graves in the churchyard, is a natural one: 'The chestnuts lived their life. It was time for them to go and new trees will be planted then they too will grow (God willing)'.

In January 2004 32 red twigged limes were planted by Christ Church to replace the avenue of chestnut trees. The local papers reported outcry at the choice of these trees 'a cheap and ugly option', 'better suited to a supermarket car park'. ³⁶⁹ This opinion is not shared by the writers in the book – there is simply pleasure at the sight of new trees, and optimism

³⁶⁸ Lewis 2001, 75

³⁶⁹ Oxford Mail January 2004

for their future: 'The great chestnuts gone and saplings in their place as sign of what goes and comes - Binsey is and will be a special place still. God be with those who worship, minister and visit here'.

This episode and the reactions and conversations entered in the visitors' book demonstrate that the book is more than simply a record of impressions of the church. It is more even than a record of community – it offers a community in itself. More than that, Binsey offers koinonia – a community where intensely felt and very personal feelings and thoughts can be shared and explored: 'Have lost track of the days I have come back married now as I said I would but still with a troubled mind. I am writing this by torch light as we were so desperate to come here before leaving tomorrow. We missed the service by several hours but now I know that all I wanted was just to come here again. thank you for keeping this wonderful place open'

'In the end..It is the sacred place in ourselves that we are seeking....the place where we can feel love.'³⁷⁰At first it seems as if no perceptible community exists at Binsey – the journey is too short to allow for a liminal *communitas* to form on the road, and there are too few visitors to form a community on arrival at the place. However, Binsey shares several characteristics of both a *communitas* and a *heterotopia*. Visits to Binsey can be seen as a liminal experience – a transforming experience that occurs outside the constraints of everyday life. Binsey itself can be seen as a type of *heterotopia* – a multi layered site that exists outside of, but in strong relationship with, normally experienced reality. The community that is formed at Binsey is one that is found outside time, within the visitors' book, where experiences can be shared and discussed, memories and associations formed, and the sacred nature of the space authenticated and verified. It is here that a *heterotopian koinonia* is formed: a community that allows for honesty and reflection while still maintaining the freedom of multi interpretations: 'I visit this old church from time to time. I'm a Muslim but I love this church and find peace here. This is God's place, no matter what you call it'.

'Pilgrimage to Jerusalem is not therefore about a journey to manipulate God's blessing but is concerned with a return to our place – an environment, history and community – in

³⁷⁰ Du Boulay 1996, 11

which our faith, hope and love are deepened. We need not look to Jerusalem to tell us of our identity because in God humanity is faithfully kept for us.³⁷¹

³⁷¹ Scott 2004, 121

10 CONCLUSION

This study has examined over fifteen hundred entries in a number of visitors' books left in Binsey church, which itself is left open all the time. Binsey has traditionally been a destination for pilgrims, both during heyday of pilgrimage in medieval times and during the contemporary revival of pilgrimage spirituality. Its place as a pilgrimage destination has recently been supported by its presence on the Diocesan Pilgrimage map, and a mention in the Diocesan Spiritual Guide to the Thames path. The validity of pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline has been explored in conjunction with the nature and purpose of sacred places. The event that occurs at Binsey has been compared to both contemporary and medieval pilgrimages, and similarities and differences observed. It has been concluded that visitors' trips to Binsey share the many of the elements that constitute a pilgrimage. Where it differs, such as in length of journey and frequency of visit, the differences are not so significant as to preclude a visit being described as a pilgrimage. The uniqueness of the Binsey experience lies not in the journey there, but in the perception of community that is at the heart of Binsey. In common with other small rural churches, Binsey is seen as a holy place and shares some of the characteristics that define a 'holy place'. However, the community exists at Binsey is not one that is time bound, but instead is present vertically through time, held in place by the visitors' book. The community that is witnessed in the entries is lively and articulate – the visitors' book is used for comments on literature, spirituality and architecture. The community provides a witness of events and is a holder of the stories of the community, which contribute to the story of Binsey itself. This community has similarities with that of the liminoid *communitas* posited by Turner and Turner, and with the heterotopias of Foucault, but has been called a 'heterotopian *koinonia*'. This enables both the closeness of the community and its common ground of acknowledgement of the holiness of Binsey as well as the many different layers of meaning and interpretation that Binsey holds, to be recognised within one phrase.

The visitors' book at Binsey appears to differ significantly to the books of other churches. This may be because the nearness of the location to the university city of Oxford has given rise to larger than average numbers of academics and theologians who are able to articulate fluently their feelings and reactions. It may be caused by the fact that Binsey is left open all the time, thus allowing visitors who are in extremes of emotion free access to a place of refuge and reflection. This, combined with the solitude of the location, may give

rise to a feeling of greater freedom when writing in the visitors' book. Perhaps also the articulate discussion of some entries gives permission to subsequent writers to be more honest about their feelings than would otherwise occur if previous entries had been limited to comments on the flower arrangements.

In order to establish the answers to these questions, more research is required into the visitors' books of other, comparable churches. It would be interesting to examine those of other churches near to the city – Islip for example, or those near other universities such as Cambridge. Larger churches, those with more limited opening times or different types of setting could also be investigated to give a fuller picture of the Binsey event.

The author was originally asked to Binsey to give some advice as to what could best be done to help Binsey be more welcoming to its visitors. On the first visit, the author was full of suggestions for prayer boards, leaflets on the history of the church, prayer cards and candle stands for use by visitors, as well as some general tidying up of the interior of the church. After this research, the author is much more humble – all that seems to be required is for Binsey to remain as open, as isolated and as prayer-filled as it currently is. Those who have charge of Binsey should take care to safeguard both the access and the surrounding environment of the church; it has a significant part to play in the spiritual health of the city and its visitors.

'You are not here to verify,
Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity,
Or carry report. You are here to kneel
Where prayer has been valid.'³⁷²

³⁷² Eliot 1975, 215

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www.veriditas.net

www.labyrinth.org

www.confest.org/thesis

<http://www.foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/>

GLOSSARY

COMMUNITAS

Community that was formed during liminoid phenomenon. It has strong ties which supersede all previous social and community ties and produce a feeling of solidarity and equality. This community Turner called *communitas*.

LIMINALITY

The transition process that accompanies a change of state or social position. Originally applied to rites of passage processes in pre-industrial cultures. Used by Turner and Turner (1967) to describe pilgrimage.

LIMINOID PHENOMENON

Coined by Turner and Turner (1967) to refer to experiences that have the characteristics of liminal experiences but which are voluntary.

HETEROTOPIA

Places which contain a number of different meanings and which comment on, invert or enact with ordinary sites.

KOINONIA

Originates from the Ancient Greek for fellowship. It is used frequently in the Bible to describe the relationships that existed between members of the early Christian church. It contains the threads of an inner goodness in terms of spiritual integrity and an outer one geared towards relationships with others.

HETEROTOPIAN KOINONIA

This concept, used by the author, offers space, like that of the Biblical desert, from where participants can critically reflect both on the world and on their own action within it. It offers a place outside time and space from which to engage with the greater reality of God in company with other people.

APPENDIX 1

ST MARGARET OF ANTIOCH, BINSEY. Photography by Henry Taunt 1892 (From Oxfordshire County Archives Collection)



APPENDIX 2

ST MARGARET OF ANTIOCH, BINSEY 2013



APPENDIX 3

THE APPROACH TO BINSEY (The replacement avenue of limes, planted in 2004)



APPENDIX 4

THE APPROACH TO BINSEY (Evidence of the felled chestnut trees)



APPENDIX 5

THE HEAVENLY GOATS



APPENDIX 6

BINSEY CHURCHYARD



APPENDIX 7

THE WELL IN THE CHURCHYARD April 2013



APPENDIX 8

ENTRANCE TO THE CHURCH April 2013



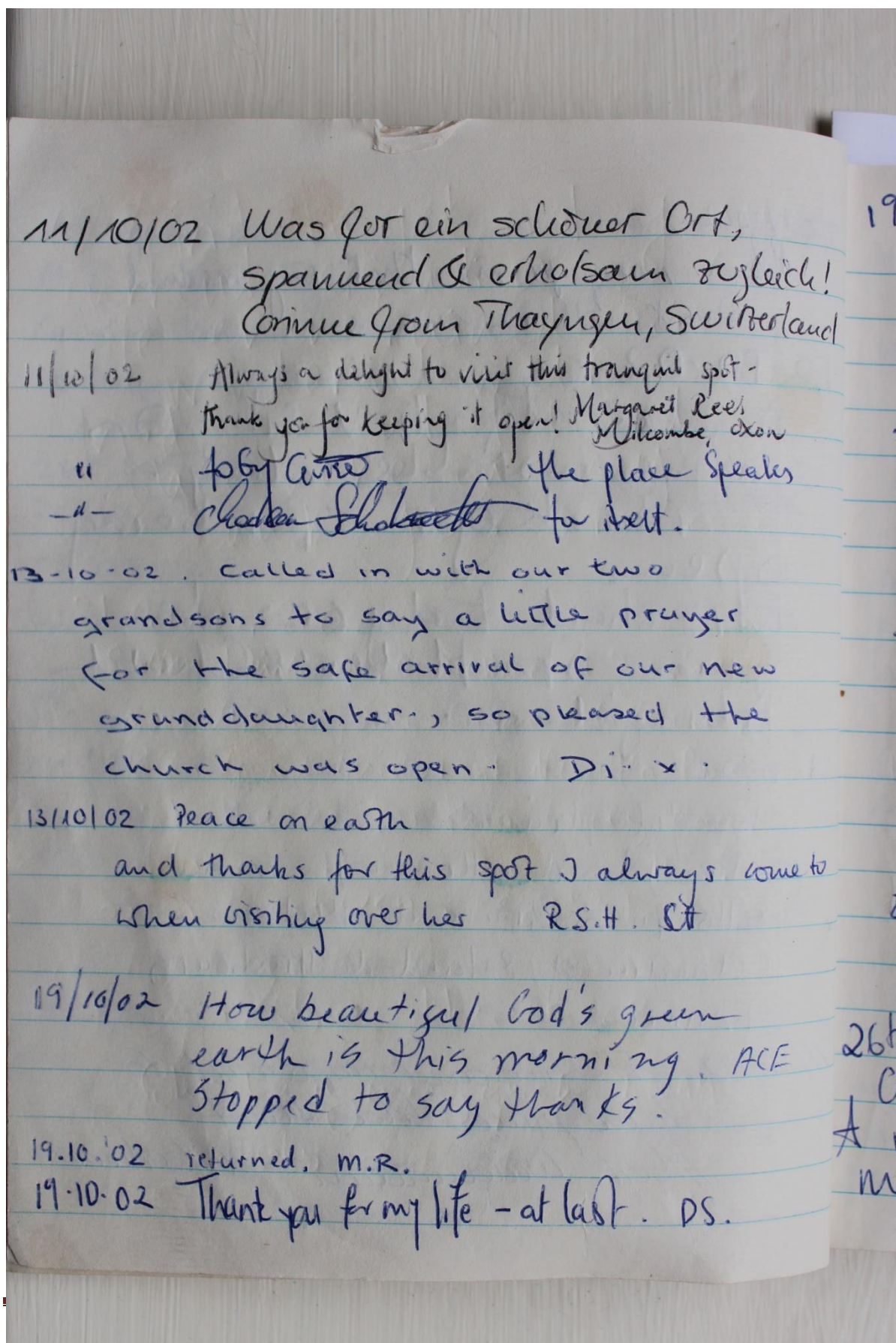
APPENDIX 9

BINSEY VILLAGE April 2013



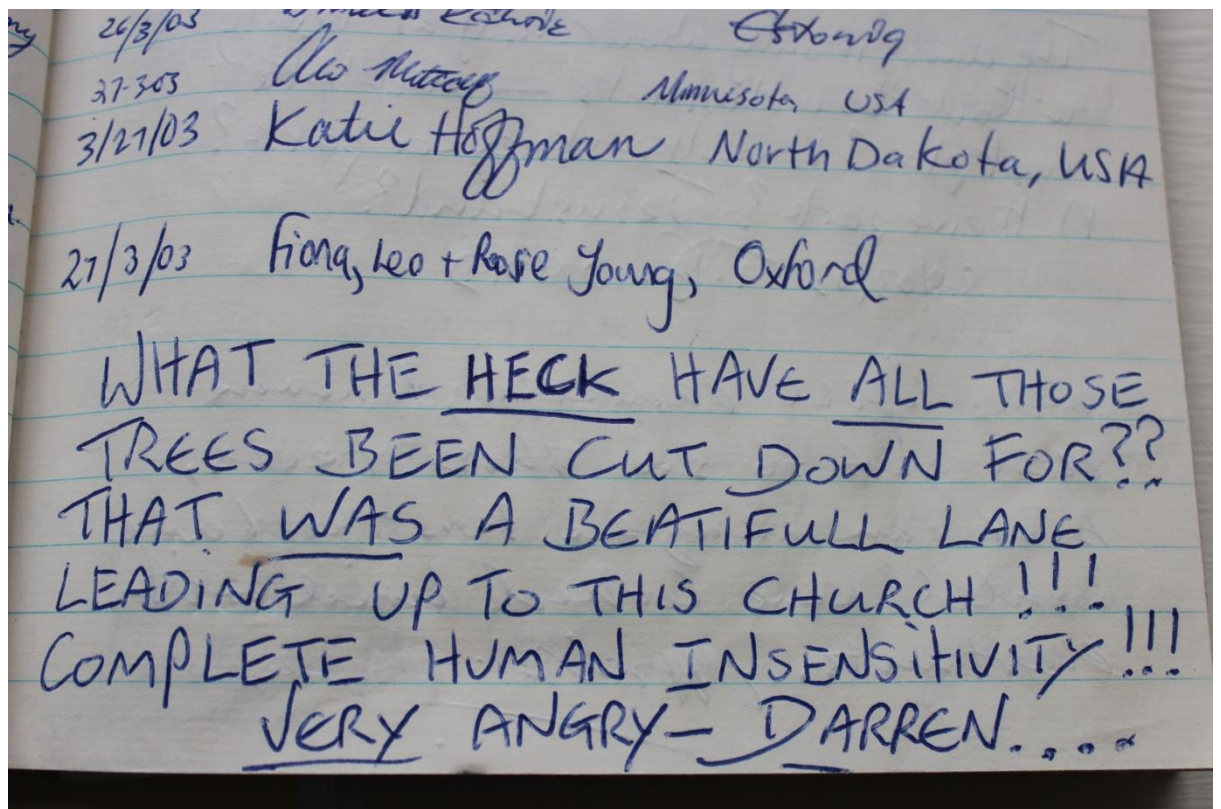
APPENDIX 10

VISITORS BOOK ENTRIES



APPENDIX 11

VISITORS BOOK ENTRIES – CHESTNUT TREES



CONSIDERATIONS ON WRITING THE RESEARCH BASED THESIS AS PART OF THE DThMIN

The seeds of this research lie in many years of research into both the theory and practise of pilgrimage. I undertook my first pilgrimage in 2004, when I walked with my family from Assisi to Gubbio, following in the footsteps of St Francis of Assisi along the 'Pilgrim Path of Peace' through the amazing countryside of Umbria, staying at small hotels and visiting the many churches and shrines along the route. This was followed in 2005 by a pilgrimage in Norway along St Olav's way, which ended in the cathedral city of Trondheim, the route having begun in Oslo. These two major pilgrimages were complemented by smaller excursions to pilgrimage sites within the UK, and the beginnings of research into the history and practice of pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline.

Having been ordained priest in 2000, I was given the opportunity of studying part time for an MA in Ministry at Oxford Brookes University; an opportunity I was glad to make use of. Using a portfolio system, the course introduced me to areas of theology and doctrine that I had not previously explored, and enabled me to research more deeply into pilgrimage, with particular reference to ways in which pilgrimage spirituality could be introduced to small rural parishes. I was especially interested in this as I was already looking for ways in which the insights I had gained on my pilgrimages could be used in a parish context. The subject of my MA dissertation was an examination of prayer stations and how they could be used effectively in a rural church context to enable the users to engage with sacred space. The dissertation traced the development of the prayer station from its medieval roots in pilgrimage and labyrinth. It explored how the use of prayer stations both as independent structures and as part of a worship event, could be used to encounter and overcome some of the challenges facing the modern rural church. Through participant observation of several prayer station worship events, these challenges, concerning the use of the rural church building, post modern religious experience and transforming communities, were explored and the success of prayer stations in meeting these challenges was critically evaluated. The nature of the prayer station worship event is and its relationship to Turner's (1878) 'liminal communitas' and Foucault's (1967) 'heterotopia' was examined and comparative tables were drawn up and a new description 'heterotopian koinonia' is defined. The dissertation concluded with recommendations for future research and indications of future directions for prayer station worship events.

I was awarded an MA in 2007, and then proceeded to research possible future areas of study. In the meantime, I had moved churches, from a multiparish rural benefice to a liberal catholic church in the centre of Oxford. My ministerial focus naturally also changed, from

exploring ways of enabling visitors to engage with the sacred space of a rural church, to inviting a largely academic and professional city congregation to explore new ways of relationship with God. I was therefore looking for a course of study that would enable me to think more widely about the church and to discover new ways of doing theology. Having greatly valued the seminar and portfolio approach of the Oxford Brookes course, I was pleased to discover a similar approach in the DThMin offered by Kings College.

The first seminar I attended came as a complete shock to me. From having studied largely topics that were well within my comfort zone and experience, such as pastoral care and Biblical studies, the first seminars on doctrine introduced me to a range of new thinking and methodology that was both exciting and frankly scary. I was aware that I had not studied or read as widely as I should, and the first term saw me frantically reading as much and as widely as I could in order to catch up. I very much appreciated the support and contributions of fellow members of the course, many of whom were suffering from the same degree of educational shock that I was.

Over the next two years, I was constantly being introduced to new ways of thinking and exploring previously uncharted theological territory – feminist theology, church history focussing on the Georgian church, practical theology. I felt hugely privileged to be able to listen to such august theologians as Alister McGrath, Luke Bretherton, Ben Quash and others, and benefitted from the discussion with other course students. This was particularly useful as at the time I was quite frustrated in my parish post. I had taken a part time Associate post in order to free up time to study and to write on pilgrimage and labyrinth, but the parish work I was doing not only threatened to eat into that precious time but was of a rather unsatisfactory level of engagement – general dogsbody rather than priest. My conversations with others, and my reading and study gave me the confidence to look beyond parish ministry to explore different ways of serving the Church. An opportunity came in the form of a meeting with the Bishop of Oxford and an invitation to become Diocesan Pilgrimage and Labyrinth Advisor. This post built on my practical experience and on my studies and writing, which had continued during this time. I led workshops, began teaching on the Continuing Education courses for curates within the Diocese, and became part of the team led by the Bishop which was tasked with introducing pilgrimage spirituality into the Oxford parishes. I wrote a leaflet on pilgrimage spirituality, helped devise a Diocesan Pilgrimage Map and wrote a spiritual guide to the Thames Path, which runs from east to west across the Diocese.

I finished the first two, taught-course years of the DThMin feeling that I had received a well rounded ‘catch-up’ with current theological thinking, and some good tools to aid me in independent research. I considered continuing to research pilgrimage, but decided instead to take the opportunity offered me of access to excellent libraries and research facilities to

explore a completely different area of ministry. In my previous career I had been Curator of Costume and Textiles for Oxfordshire Museum Services, and I decided to combine both areas of expertise in a study of what Anglican women clergy wore when they were 'on duty'

This study set out to explore the various influences that determine what Anglican women clergy choose to wear as they carry out their duties. Since there had been very little or no research in this area, the methodology employed was that of grounded ethnography, to allow the participants as much freedom as possible to discuss their clothing choices and the rationale behind them. I interviewed six senior women clergy in their homes or workplace. As expected, the dress decisions carried out on a daily basis were dependent on a number of factors, the most significant being how best to combine the personal identity of the participant with the public role of priest so that neither should overwhelm the other. This developed into an exploration of how the participants viewed their work and the overlap between this and their daily lives as householders, mothers and wives. An unexpected theme was the strong feeling of dressing to counteract expectations of a particular style of ministry; using dress as challenge and protest. All these influences were held within the desire to communicate what was perceived to be the participants' primary task – that of telling people about Jesus Christ and his gospel.

I found this study to be both exciting and interesting and from it arose a number of areas that I felt would benefit from further investigation. I debated long with myself as to whether to continue this study and make it the pilot for my RBT- certainly the raw material was there, as when I had emailed the women clergy of the Diocese to ask them to participate in the initial research, I was inundated with responses. Many of those I spoke with clearly initially felt that this subject was not important, but as conversations developed, and more questions and considerations arose, very often scepticism would become conviction as to the significance of the research. However, my ministerial practise was developing more and more into an advisory role on churches and pilgrimage/labyrinth spirituality. I was leading workshops on labyrinths and pilgrimage, lecturing, teaching in schools and leading parish pilgrimages. I was also being asked to act as advisor to small rural churches which wanted

to develop their role as places of pilgrimage, and were keen to know what sort of resources to provide to encourage and support visitors to their place of worship.

It was while I was trying to decide in which direction my RBT should develop that I walked one afternoon to Binsey Church. Lying about a mile off the Thames Path, and three miles from my house, I had been in the habit of using it as a destination for prayer walks or for when I needed to consider a problem or issue. As usual when I arrived at the church, it was empty – smelling slightly of damp and gloomy in the gathering dusk it once again offered me the space I needed to think and pray. I noticed that the visitors' book had been moved from its habitual place just at the entrance to the door and picked it up to put it back there. As I did so, I flicked through the pages, and became instantly absorbed in the stories that I found within it. Rather than simply record their names and addresses, visitors to Binsey had taken advantage of the open nature of the visitors' book to record thoughts, feelings and prayers, to narrate stories, ask for prayer and deliver news. I realised that if I sought to discover what visitors to small churches were really seeking from such a place then the best source of information was the visitors themselves. The visitors' book offered a way of exploration that was free from the constrictions of a questionnaire, unmediated by the interaction of an interview – as truthful a view as it was possible to find, in fact.

Subsequent conversations with the Vicar of Binsey enabled me to access all the visitors books since 1961, with a few missing exceptions. Although there was little beyond the basic names and addresses in the earlier books, after 2002 the data became truly rich – my research topic was decided.

I have thoroughly enjoyed researching, reading and writing up my RBT. It has arisen directly out of the work I am currently engaged upon as a priest in the Diocese of Oxford, and has had a wonderful reciprocal effect upon that work. The reading and research I have undertaken for the RBT has greatly enriched my approach to my role, which has now been expanded to Diocesan Spirituality Advisor. Concurrently, my experience of pilgrimage has fed into my research, giving me a deeper understanding of the nature of pilgrimage and pilgrim communities. I believe this symbiosis has fulfilled the aims of the course, in that it

gave me not only the knowledge I needed to undertake the research, but the structure and the space in which to explore a subject with I am very involved.

During the time of my RBT I have missed the support and community of fellow students, as we meet only once a term, and this is perhaps the only comment I would make about the course in general. I am aware that a termly seminar on a relevant topic would be expensive and difficult to arrange, but I believe they would be appreciated. The research days are very busy and heavily timetabled – an alternative type of meeting would benefit students who work alone for much of the time, under pressure from their other commitments, and very often only a resignation letter away from giving up completely!